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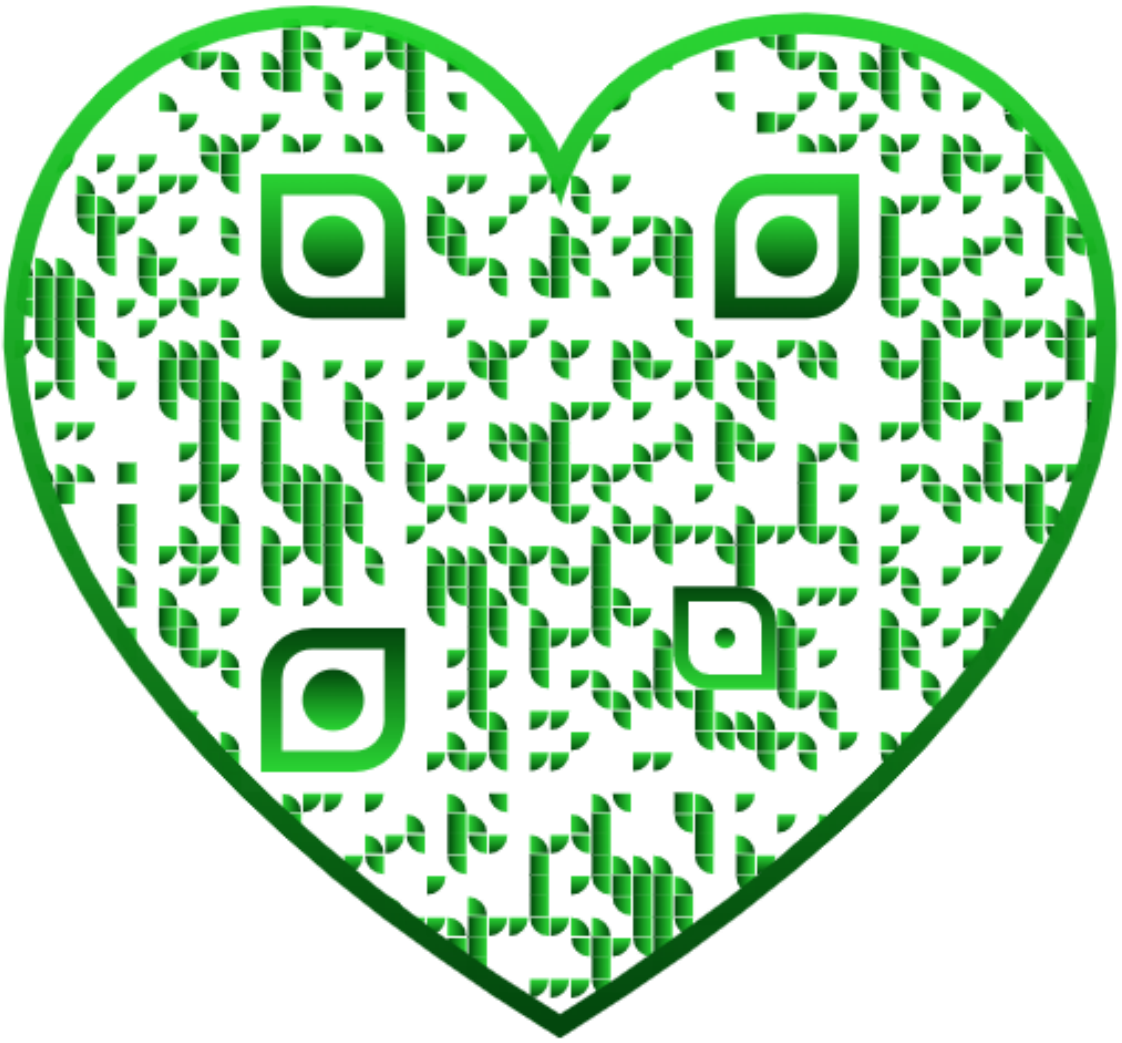

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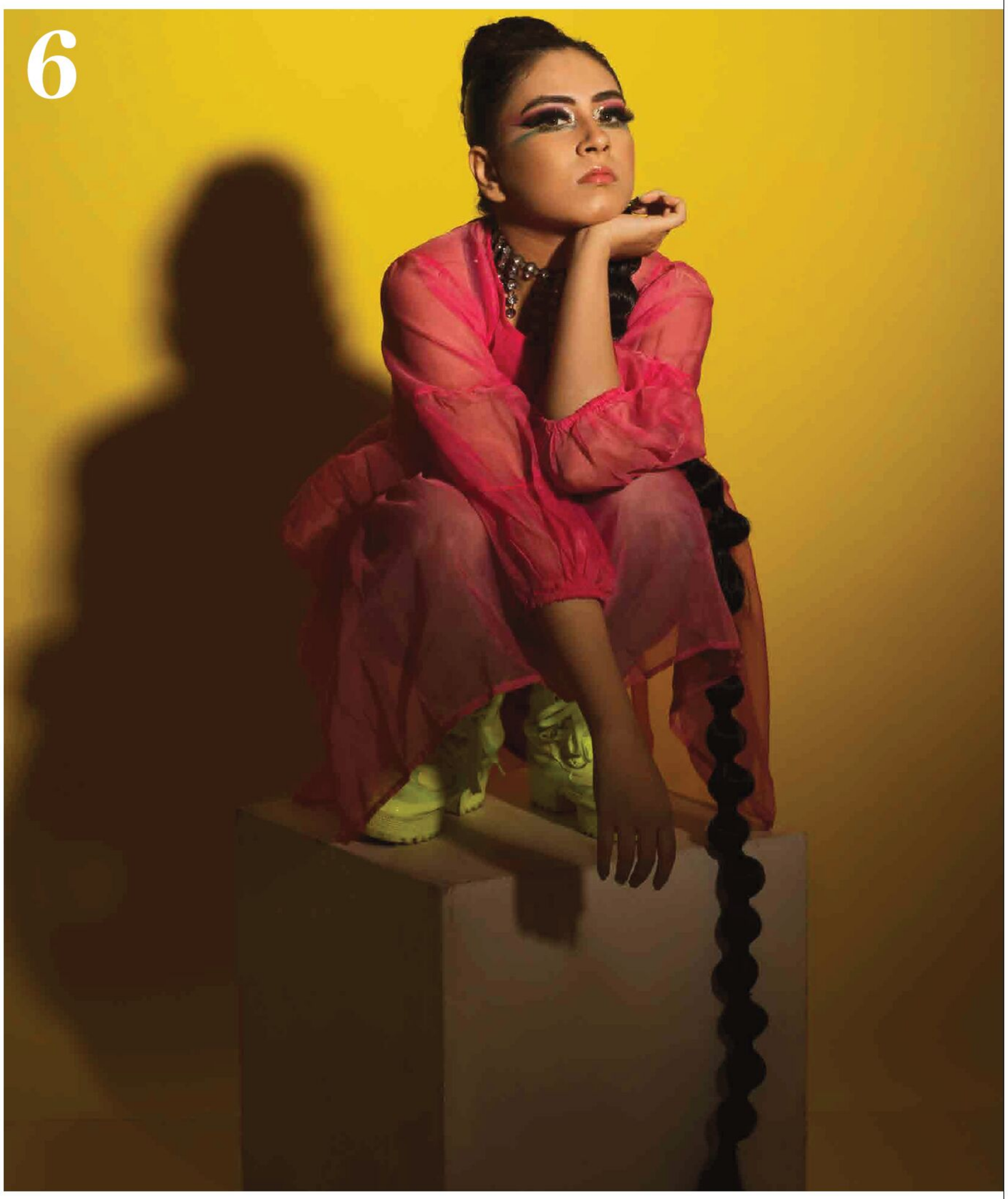

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Correspondence

+ LOVE LETTERS & ADVICE

"It was inspiring to read about how LØREN opened up about finding creativity in loneliness."

— Suresh Anand

Inspiring LØREN

It was inspiring to read about how the South Korean powerhouse LØREN opened up about finding creativity in loneliness, making the jump from club DJ to rockstar and more. I am looking forward to what the future holds for LØREN.

Hashbass Brings the Party

The interview with Hashbass on his 'Solo at Your Party' EP is a musical journey worth embarking on. Hashbass's insights and the EP's songs are a delightful exploration of creativity. A captivating read for anyone intrigued by India's burgeoning music scene.

- Chris Fernandes

Mali Walk's Away

The feature on Mali's "Walk Away" receiving an immersive studio treatment is a testament to the evolution of her music production. Mali's artistry and the innovative approach make for an engaging read and a fascinating glimpse into the world of her musical creativity.

- Simone Carvalho

SPOTLIGHT

Best of 2023

The Best Indian Indie Albums of 2023 So Far is a musical treasure trove. It spotlights exceptional talents like Indian Ocean, Tsumyoki, Dreamhour, and Ramil Ganjoo, offering a vibrant tapestry of India's indie music scene. A must-read for music enthusiasts!

- Rahul Kumar

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RollingStoneIndia RollingStoneIn

Komorebi Traverses Virtual Backgrounds in New Video For 'I Grew Up'

The song is off the New Delhi singer-producer's forthcoming conceptual album 'The Fall'

THE LAST TIME we spoke to New Delhi singer-producer Tarana Marwah aka Komorebi was when she released the four-track *Birds And Bees* EP with fellow artist Abhishek Bhatia aka Curtain Blue (from experimental rockers The Circus). Since then, Marwah has been busy scoring films, performing in the U.K. and even did a listening session with radio presenter Bobby Friction as part of the *BBC Asian Network* in London.

In the midst of all this, Marwah has also been putting together her multimedia concept album *The Fall*. The record follows 2017's full-length debut *Soliloquy*. Marwah says, "[The new album] includes two music videos and an exclusive Komorebi comic book with the same name, that goes hand in hand with the music."

One of the music videos is the record's lead single, the enchanting "I Grew Up," which also features Mumbai/Auckland guitarist Warren Mendonsa aka Blackstratblues. In this interview with *Rolling Stone India*, Marwah talks to us about *The Fall*, how she created the clip for "I Grew Up," what she has planned next and more. Read below.

When we talked in 2021 (for "Chanda") you mentioned *The Fall*, how long has this project been in the works and what can you tell me about how you came up with the concept for not only the music but also all the visuals attached to it?

This project has been in the pipeline for over five years. I've worked with close to 100 people on it – visual artists, graphic designers, 3D designers, virtual production, post-production, stylists (Glorious Luna and Shaurya H.) and fashion designer (Rajesh Pratap Singh). Within the music space, I've collaborated with Easy Wanderlings, Dhruv Visvanath, James Gair, Ritwik De, Mavron Quartet, Gaurav Raina, Blackstratblues, Sahil Vasudeva, and many others. The comic book was designed by Neelav Ghosh and the album concept art by Improper Studio.

The music is emotional, powerful and falls under the category of electronica/trip-hop. The comic book is a coming-of-age story about one Kiane, who traverses through the cosmos in search of meaning, and as a means of escape from her home planet. There are many other interesting characters, namely Owlie (her pet) and Luna (the antagonist).

I've always been a big advocate for collaboration, and this is the ultimate, final form of that vision. I've been wanting to create an IP that's unique and rarely attempted before in our nascent country. The ultimate goal is to create a Komorebi video game, however, for this release, I want to keep the focus on the new and improved musical expression. The latency in writing and release was a tough one to conquer, I was waiting for the right label and sponsorship to back me up. Good things take time and I believe it has all been worth it.

What can you tell me about the album's first single "I Grew Up?"

"I Grew Up" is a poignant song that reflects on the journey of personal growth and the choices we make in life. The lyrics acknowledge the half-truths of the world but focus on the path of love chosen by myself. The song explores the challenges of facing unmovable mountains and the significance of the things we can't lose. It recognizes the diverse nature of individuals but emphasizes the weight of shared emotions. "I Grew Up" serves as a reminder that growth is a natural

part of life, and despite the changes, one will always cherish their bond with loved ones.

In the context of Komorebi's comic, "I Grew Up" is about the challenges Kiane faces as she sets off on her journey through the cosmos, and the sacrifices she has to make in order to truly own her right as a space traveler.

"I Grew Up" is a poignant song that reflects on the journey of personal growth and the choices we make in life."

What was it like putting together the music video for "I Grew Up?"
When I was watching a video explaining how [sci-fi/Western T.V. series] *The Mandalorian* uses a video game software in place of a green screen to create virtual backgrounds, I had no idea I'd be doing the same for my next music video! By using Unreal Engine, we could create a photorealistic 3D background that moves strictly with the camera's real view. The whole process is finalized on set, versus having to blend seamlessly through compositing. It's a perfect combination of real and 'unreal.'

Coming back to the album, what can folks expect from the rest of the record and when is it due to be released?
The seven-track album is full of surprises and releases on September 8th, roughly the same time as the comic. So much time has passed; I've grown into who I am as a woman and an artist, which is strongly conveyed through the meaningful lyrics and songwriting. I passively watch myself singing as my inner child, a rebellious teenager, a lost 20-something-year-old, and finally a wise adult. It was interesting to superimpose those experiences onto my fictional character Kiane and tell my story through her.

We are also cutting vinyls and USB cassettes for the same. The comic book will release around the same time in collaboration with The Comic Book Store.

Any gigs planned around this release?
I am expanding Komorebi into a full-band setup. We will be putting together a tour shortly after the September release. I'll also be hitting the Ziro Festival on September 29th.

DAVID BRITTO

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Dhruv Visvanath On Discipline, New Music and Appearing on 'My Kind Of Country'

"I still consider myself to be a student of life," says the New Delhi artist

New Delhi-based Dhruv Visvanath's new music video for "Gimme Love" brings to the front the protagonist's memories, achievements and past glories and failures that get a much-needed discarding, with filmmaker Tanvi Gandhi giving hoarded boxes life. While it might be a similar theme of everyday objects showing us their secret yet fairytale-like sentience that was seen in the video for "Wild" from 2018, the songwriting of "Gimme Love" moves in a different direction. Since the release of "Wild" and his album *The Lost Cause* in 2018, Visvanath took the route of releasing singles building up to his 2021 album The Book of I, which he carried into releasing his powerful 2022 EP *Demons*.

The first half of 2023 has been arguably Visvanath's biggest, becoming a finalist on Apple TV+ show *My Kind of Country* – where he covered everyone from Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire" to Billie Eilish's "Bad Guy" alongside his own material in Nashville. Then, he collaborated with composer-producer Achint and Gujarati vocalist Aditya Gadhvi for the Coke Studio Bharat song "Khalasi," called upon for his distinct percussive acoustic guitar strumming.

There's still a bit of that jangly, crisp percussive and fingerstyle guitar technique heard on "Gimme Love," but in a way that's perhaps only supplementary to Visvanath's pop songwriting, something he did with London-based Matty Benbrook. The latter's credits range from Paolo Nutini to KT Tunstall and Jake Bugg, among others. In an interview with *Rolling Stone India*, Visvanath talks about the new release, songwriting sessions with Benbrook and just how special it was for him to be on *My Kind of Country*.

"I feel like I've been blessed with a lot of positive messages around the song, maybe even a few shed tears as well!"

MAAN BORUAH

What has the reception for "Gimme Love" been like so far? Do you feel like you're in a place where you're balancing the right amounts of familiarity (from your past catalog) with new directions?
I feel like I've been blessed with a lot of positive messages around the song, maybe even a few shed tears as well! I'm thrilled that in the ocean of music that comes our way, people find a way to connect with my song. In all honesty, all I'm trying to do is tell stories in new ways. I've been making and producing music for so long that sometimes I have to learn how to use the tools upside down!

And that's a great thing, to feel that instead of plateauing, or feeling stuck, you're riding through peaks and troughs. I still consider myself to be a student of life, and I'm always learning, and one such lesson was that great progress is the result of many small steps. I just hope that I've taken enough steps for listeners to hear the journey.

How did your connect with Matty Benbrook happen? How did that process of jamming/ideating on a song as songwriters feel like even though it was virtual?
Lockdowns are a funny thing, and that time provided me with the opportunity to connect with a lot of people. I've actually got you to thank for helping me figure out how to work across borders! I actually ended up writing quite a few songs during that time, but my encounter with Matty was quite something. His publisher had put out some feelers to see if there were any songwriters he'd like to work with from India, and it was just a matter of sitting down together and sharing ideas. I tend to show up a little prepared, I always have a bunch of ideas ready to build out, and "Gimme Love" was just one of them.

I really enjoyed spending time with him, the actual writing felt like we were just thinking about things. It felt like we were friends, just finding out new stuff about each other, and talking about the good and bad parts of life. Songwriting is just a lot of talking, and melody is the happy accident that turns that conversation into a song.

"Gimme Love" was born out of an idea you had from your Song a Day Challenge, a tradition you continue to keep. Does this sort of exercise signify a sense of discipline for you? And do you feel discipline/regularity is always what has led to great ideas for your music, or are there other, stronger factors?
I find discipline to be a very demanding word. However in small doses, inviting that pressure on yourself can be rather rewarding. It's an exercise, a way to flex a muscle and sometimes a reminder to tell yourself, you've still got it. The idea of giving myself this challenge was to get me to start and finish ideas, to go from thought to song in as short a time, so that I could have ideas I could always build further.

I liken it to collecting all the Lego bricks I need to build the next best idea. Some songs born out of the challenge are "Carry," "Jungle," "Fly," "The Mountain King," "Wildfire," and now "Gimme Love." I think of it as a sneak peek for what's to come, every idea from the Song A Day Challenge, has the potential to become something I release in the future. I've been doing it for six years now, and I have close to 120 songs to choose from. Not every idea is great, but I know that it's a sign of progress.

What was it like working with Tanvi [Gandhi, filmmaker] once again after "Wild" for the music video? What kind of creative inputs did you have for her and the crew, if at all?
Tanvi is a maverick and honestly, one of the most creative people I've ever known. I think her biggest strength comes from always looking at every story as a blank canvas waiting to be filled with mysteries, and emotion and personality. My experience with working with her was rather seamless and I was blown away with the story she brought to me.

I tend to stay far away from any visual creative input. The only thing I wanted was for there to be a heartwarming story over a song that speaks of loving yourself. Seeing the final creation brought me to tears and I'm forever grateful. My goal is always to make something that will stand the test of time, and I hope when someone thinks of my song, they see the story that was so lovingly created by Tanvi Gandhi.

It's been a few months since your appearance on *My Kind of Country* was up on streaming, on Apple TV+. We get a good idea about what being on that show was like for you, but what was it like sitting with the news of the show for a while and then finally being able to talk about it?

Do you know that feeling when you want to gently nudge everyone around and tell them "Psst, I'm going to be on a show on Apple TV"?
I felt that every day, for about one and a half years. The show in itself was an incredible experience but now that it's out there, it's like having a literal copy of a memory. I think back to all the moments in between, the friends I've made and am still in touch with. I'm glad that I managed to surprise people with stepping out of my comfort zone, playing country music.

I will say this, on the day the finale aired, I was aware of the result, I knew exactly who was going to show up on screen, I knew exactly what I was going to play, however, I sat around family, best friends, people I loved, and watched their reactions, heard their cheers, spent time in their enjoyment. I was excited to be up there, but for a second, I got to live in a little bit of pride, and I am so happy, got to share it with the people who matter to me. I know I couldn't be there without them.

What else is coming up through 2023?
"Gimme Love" is the start of a larger musical story, a whole new EP, that will release later this year. I'm also looking forward to getting back to the stage, performing live, it's been a while and I hope I can still have fun, so look forward to a tour soon! Besides that, I have loved my journey as a producer, and I'm currently scoring films, and working on collaborations with many artists. The year might be short, but life is kinda long. So whatever may come, I'm excited to be an artist, forever and always!

ANURAG TAGAT

Arjun Kanungo on Having a Vision for Indian Pop on 'Industry2' and Foraying Into Japan

The singer, composer and producer's second album sees him collaborate with Japanese rapper Cyber Rui, plus singer-songwriter Shirley Setia and pop artist Zaeden

JUST AS WE start our video chat with pop artist Arjun Kanungo in Mumbai, his poodle Kyubi jumps in the frame for attention, only to be pleaded off his lap with a laugh and an apology. The Mumbai-raised artist has just released his second album *Industry2* – obviously, a sequel to his 2022 album *Industry* – as a means to do his own thing after years of making moves that advanced his career as a mainstream singer in India.

With the eight-track album, it's the first time Kanungo went against current release norms and released two singles – The Weeknd-esque neon Hindi funky pop song "Danger" and the wistful synth-pop duet with Shirley Setia on "Sach Bata Mujhe" – and then put out the full record. Even while swimming against the tide, Kanungo did play it safe by releasing two lead singles which were fully in the realm of commercial pop. "Because I have noticed that while

"In Japan, the culture is quite different. The older they get the more popularity they gain, instead of, where young artists have that peak period, and then they kind of go into a lull."

fans appreciate certain types of songs, I think the regular pop songs are the ones that really penetrate and kind of are able to travel," he adds.

One of the reasons that there is a sequel to *Industry*, perhaps, is because Kanungo had a lot more things to say about how he wanted to make music. He says, "Albums are like larger bodies of work, which is more about the artist than just the songs. It's more detailed in the sense that you get a better sense of who the artist is, what they're capable of, which you cannot in a single [release]." He thinks back to the song "Bura Sapna" from *Industry* as "almost a fuck-you to the industry." Kanungo says, "It was just like, 'I've become part of you, but I hate myself.'"

Industry2, then, is the update and pointing to where he is right now, which is a much more globally-focused space. Five music videos were shot in Japan, where Kanungo is keen on building a foundation. Part of that foundation is a song like "India to Japan," the opening track on the album that features Japanese rapper Cyber Rui and Setia as well, along with vocals from IP Singh and Yash Vaid. It's a trap-meets-pop song that sees Hindi and Japanese vocals. With Cyber Rui, he met her among seven or eight artists and vibed the most with her. "In Japan, the culture is quite different. Like, the older they get the more popularity they gain, instead of, where young artists have that peak period, and then they kind of go into a lull. In Japan, like the opposite. There are a few exceptions, but on average, the older artists are more successful," he says. Cyber Rui, however, was younger and newer among the artists that Kanungo met, and he says she brought a character to life in her verse on "India to Japan."

Among the other notable strides on *Industry2* are "Kismat," which has a two-minute radio edit but also a six-and-a-half-minute extended version. The latter came first and Kanungo says his team convinced him to put out a shorter version as well for marketability. Then, there's "Tu Hain" with Zaeden, which Kanungo says sends out the message about his broader vision with *Industry2*. He points to how the album intended to be a nod to Indian pop artists of a new generation, like himself, Armaan Malik, Shirley Setia, Sanam Puri, Darshan Raval and Zaeden. Kanungo says, "As an artist, my vision was, what if we could restart? I think all of us did stuff in the name of commercialism over the years. What if we could make an album where it was just like, fuck commercialism?"

Kanungo bows out from *Industry2* in just that way, with the English song "Destiny." Previously, Kanungo's written and performed English music in rock and metal bands, including electronic-rock act Far Travel Music (the band's guitarist Sanju Aguiar was called on once again by Kanungo to contribute to *Industry2*). Fans who know Kanungo from these projects were perhaps surprised when he began putting out Hindi music, but so was the artist himself. "I didn't speak Hindi much until I was 18. We all speak English and Marathi at home," he says. While touring with legendary singer Asha Bhosle, a rumor began – due to his vocal inflections – that he was from the U.K. It's been quite a journey from there to being one of the front-running Hindi pop voices in India. The past is still as much part of his future, though. "The 2008 time was the best time in my whole life. We were basically just writing music and chilling in somebody's garage.

There are two more songs from Kanungo that didn't make *Industry2* that will be released in September and October. There's an international tour in the works, with September, October and November for India, followed by January and February 2024 in Europe and the U.S.. For Japan, some of his hits are being re-recorded in Japanese, featuring local artists. "We're trying to do some stuff in South Korea as well. I'm just trying to expand in a meaningful way to these countries where there's actually some connection. I'm hoping that I can become more conversational and fluent with the language, so we get to a place where it's like, I'm singing Japanese songs [...] That whole journey is going to be quite cool," he adds. **ANURAG TAGAT**

RAHUL JHANGIANI

From Kashmir to Cape Town: Rashmeet Kaur on Collaborations, Actor Aspirations and Community

The singer-composer recently teamed up with Kashmiri filmmaker Danish Renzu for the dark-pop song "Dil Khanjar"

BACK FROM her morning run, Rashmeet Kaur is as energetic as ever when she talks about her involvement as singer-composer on the song "Dil Khanjar," whose music video sees the artist play a role of a female protagonist bent on avenging the death of her partner.

Just like the revelatory turn in the music video directed by Kashmiri filmmaker Danish Renzu and featuring lyrics by Sunayana Kachroo, our interview with Kaur – a multi-genre artist who's worked in hip-hop, EDM, Punjabi pop, Sufi Bollywood soundtracks and more – comes with new goals she's set for herself. She's an aspiring actor and has a project in the works that intends to make her a global artist. There's also her appearance as a contestant on action reality show *Fear Factor: Khatron Ke Khiladi* (which, interestingly, also features rapper Dino James) which is currently on air.

Kaur says over a call that she's also working on "the biggest project of my life right now" out later this year. She adds, "It's a hip-hop project and it involves multiple artists. It's going to blow everyone's mind [...] I feel that people will get to hear a new side of me, but still intact with the rooted, Punjabi side of me."

As an artist who's collaborated with everyone from producers like Nucleya and Su Real to rappers like Raftaar and KR$NA and many more in between, Kaur's openness to building a community together is at the core of such partnerships. While filming for *Khatron Ke Khiladi* in Cape Town, she went on to find South African and Congolese artists to work with, leading to more music that's coming up. In an interview with *Rolling Stone India*, Kaur talks about "Dil Khanjar," collaborations and being an artist who's not bound by genres. Excerpts:

What drew you towards working on "Dil Khanjar" and how did the project come about?
So I have a friend who's a very talented and very incredible director, his name is Danish Renzu. He showed me these amazing lyrics written by Sunayana Kachroo, who's in Boston.

He asked if I'm interested to work on these lyrics, because he knows that I'm very inclined towards meaningful lyrics. I really resonated with the lyrics. And I thought, yes, we can definitely make something out of this.

One day we met at Starbucks Bandra, and then we took an Uber together and that's when I ended up composing 'Dil Khanjar.' I was just throwing ideas to Danish as, 'This is how I think it should be.' We wanted to do something along the lines of [1998 song by A.R. Rahman] 'Satrangi Re' and 'Mehboob Mere' [1967 song]... Sufi, but groovy, with one loop going on, but it's really Arabic at the same time and maintaining the Indian vibe. I ended up recording everything on my voice recorder and I still have it. I might put some BTS posts about how we did it.

It's darker vibe. It's the kind of songs we don't really hear that often any longer.

Yeah, it's not there anymore. People don't explore those kinds of sounds anymore. Nothing against anyone, but people have changed and evolved a lot. I wanted to bring something from the past and pay tribute to what we used to create. 'Dil Khanjar' sounds like a film song. Whoever listens to it would say it perfectly fixed fits in a film. Sourabh Lokhande, my friend who's a music producer, he got on board and we sat on the structure together to make it.

"I think the person who sings, the singer-songwriter, can act better than hiring any actor, because that person [the singer-songwriter] has been through all the emotions while creating the song."

The music video sees you in a persona, in this different mindspace. What was that like?
For the music video, Danish and I went through a lot of concepts about what we should for 'Dil Khanjar.' I wanted to act, so the story's going on, on the side. And one side, I'm just singing to my lover, who's no more there. It was challenging also, because I have never acted acted. I have done a lot of music videos, but I really wanted to give it a try and I am an aspiring actor now.

I was thinking why not show it through your music? I think the person who sings, the singer-songwriter, can act better than hiring any actor, because that person [the singer-songwriter] has been through all the emotions while creating the song.

We earlier thought to shoot it in Ladakh, but due to the weather, we couldn't. We shot it in beautiful Kashmir and I was wearing a 10-kilogram lehenga and running all around Kashmir. People were like, 'What is wrong with this girl? Why is she running and crying?' [*laughs*]. It was a different experience and I'm always going to cherish it.

You're a serial collaborator when it comes to music. How do you choose some of the projects when they come to you and also when you have to seek them out yourself?
It's a community. Artists can't just flourish on their own. The artist has to build the community together, bring everybody together, and discover more new artists and always try and push the boundaries.

And the only way to do it nowadays is that you have to collaborate with different people. I've just been to Cape Town for two months. I was collaborating with African artists over there. I think the more open you are, the more chances of building this community... the power of it increases – the chances, the potential, it becomes even stronger and powerful.

I mean, that's great that you're independent, but you can never have an idea that how much you can grow, how much you can learn from another artist, up until you are open to doing that. So I think for me, collaborating with different artists is very, very important for me to grow and learn.

With regards to how I choose my projects, I feel the song should be nice, whether it's a beat, or lyrics, like in 'Dil Khanjar.' If I like some idea from other artists who pitch it to me, it should touch my heart first. I should feel from inside that, 'Oh, yeah, I can give something, I can add to it.' So that's when I think I can take this project. I don't go by the name, or by the views, or by the history, your past, I should just like the song. And if I liked the song that I will start building on it. That's how sort of my mind works.

In collaborations like out in Cape Town, the boundaries begin to blur, right? You don't think in terms of a particular community of artists either then.

Absolutely. I mean, it's so beautiful. Music is universal. Music is way beyond our thinking, our imagination, our ideas, our formula, so why not expand and keep expanding all the time? That's how I every day.

I want to have new ideas, I want to attract new ideas and new artists so that I can collaborate with them on and then have new creative ideas for music videos, whether it comes to my fitness also. There's definitely exchange of culture, which is amazing. You can never tell how magical it can be. But to be open and ready to show what ideas you have and be comfortable with it and also to accept other people's ideas, I think that's where it starts. Like my next release is a mixture of Afro and English and Congo and a lot of different people and regions.

What can you tell us about the music you made in Cape Town?
I was there for two months and it was a very hectic and packed schedule, but I got a chance to connect with a few people and we made a tune. Now it's a track that we have and I'm so happy. If I put Hindi in Afro music and there's a Congolese artist who's written a verse on it. So now I feel it becomes more than India – the sound becomes global. My target is to become global, rather than just focusing on one country or one region, or just one category of people.

ANURAG TAGAT

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Actor You Need to Know: Park So-dam

Park is a coup de maître, hitting a home run in her game, and her efforts, one after another, are only improving that.

PARK SO-DAM most innately overpowers the screen, as if she just assumes control, leaving nothing for a chance to be extraordinary. Ever the sharpshooter, Park, 31, has been well on her way—her portrayals forge a bond with those watching her; that empathy comes from her acting. And she is routinely breaking stereotypes—in playing a role, in being someone—possibly breaching her own rules. That is what makes her so promising. Park is appropriately one of Korea's most prolific performers—in indie films and elsewhere. She has a unique grasp of what acting entails, which is why it seems her role-playing is so readily creative.

She must have found her voice in it in her formative years when she turned to independent films: the Korean Academy of Film Arts feature *Ingtoogi: Battle of the Internet Trolls* and *Steel Cold Winter* (2013), the latter of which picked up the spotlight at the 18th Busan International Film Festival. It became apparent that Park could beat one to the draw in performing, and on the horizon, she had roles in hit 2014 films such as the thriller *Scarlet Innocence* and the period saga *The Royal Tailor*.

In a boarding school of secrets, the nucleus of *The Silenced* (2015), students are abruptly disappearing, compelling Cha Ju-ran/Shizuko (Park Bo-young) to uncover the truth and the weird changes she is experiencing in her body and attitude. Joins in the attempt: fellow student-turned-friend Hong Yeon-deok/Kazue (Park So-dam). The mystery-thriller-horror flick nabbed multiple nods. Park So-dam's sharp-as-a-tac Yeon-deok was an impressive display in laying bare the authenticity of her being. She

awed, to the extent of winning the Best Supporting Actress at the 16th Busan Film Critics Awards.

The event heralded her breakout season as a mainstream actor, with roles in blockbuster movies like the action-comedy *Veteran*, the historical drama *The Throne*, and the feted supernatural mystery thriller *The Priests* in 2015. Park's minutely detailed interpretive strength—conspicuously in *The Priests*—brought her demon-possessed high school character, Young-shin, alive. She scooped Best New Actress honors for picturing, down to a T, her wrestling with the pangs of fear and pain and her

She is a rulebreaker, never adhering to a pattern, a formula, or a type of role, and hence every time she takes on a fresh identity, she brings something great to the table.

vulnerability in the throes of terror she gets subjected to.

Park should have had a busy time during this timeframe. She was frequenting the big and small screens, doing a parade of acts, and gradually headlining in the process. And as I noted here before, she is a rulebreaker, never adhering to a pattern, a formula, or a type of role, and hence every time she takes on a fresh identity, she brings something great to the table. Even in characters like Gye Jin-sung—a traffic policewoman of high morals from the television

series *A Beautiful Mind* (2016)—the story of a decorated but heartless neurosurgeon linked to unexplained deaths in his hospital or Eun Ha-won—an athletic high schooler—weathering mistreatment at home from the enduring romantic K-drama *Cinderella with Four Knights* (2016).

The 92nd Academy Awards had director Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019) pick the top four categories for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, and Best International Feature Film—making it the only film in a language other than English to do so. This was just one of several distinctions the movie won. And with it, Park's Kim Ki-jung gained public esteem as a manipulative, sharp member of the destitute Kim family who schemes to work for a wealthy household while posing to be competent. The social satire's shocking twist of events is reinforced by an unexpected influx of intense emotions that emerge in the finale.

Park is a coup de maître, hitting a home run in her game, and her efforts, one after another, are only improving that. When you see her, you're amazed at the sense of self-assurance that she exudes while demonstrating her unique set of skills. So, even as *Record of Youth*'s (2020) Ahn Jeong-ha, a makeup artist; *Special Delivery*'s (2022) Jang Eun-ha, a North Korean defector turned special delivery driver; or *Phantom*'s (2023) Yuriko, an influential player in the Joseon government-general in 1933—Park captures the mind in a flash. **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

PHOTO COURTESY OF TVN; HANCINEMA

Why South Korean Artist Aoora is Recreating Indian Hits: 'It Matched With My Energy'

From Bappi Lahiri's Eighties songs "Auva Auva" and "Jimmy Jimmy" to more, Aoora brings K-pop flair that he's honed with prior releases like "Twerk"

IF THERE'S ONE Indophile among K-pop artists right now, it's Aoora. From trying vada pavs to dancing with Indian crews to singing "Naatu Naatu" from *RRR*, the publicity blitz that he's undertaken in the country has been massive this year. He's already performed five shows across India and most importantly, it's come on the back of releasing "K-pop versions" of Bollywood's iconic Eighties hits "Auva Auva" and "Jimmy Jimmy" – both composed by Bappi Lahiri – via major label Saregama.

In the music video for "Auva Auva," Aoora is seen around different parts of Mumbai in different eye-catching outfits, including a "very warm fur coat," as he mentions that the temperature was 38 degrees. "It was a crowded street and everyone was wondering if I had gone crazy," he says over an email interview. He adds, however, that India is like a second home. "I love the energy and colors in India and they inspire me a lot. My last music video was like a personal journey for me where I could express my style in some very raw Mumbai locations," Aoora says.

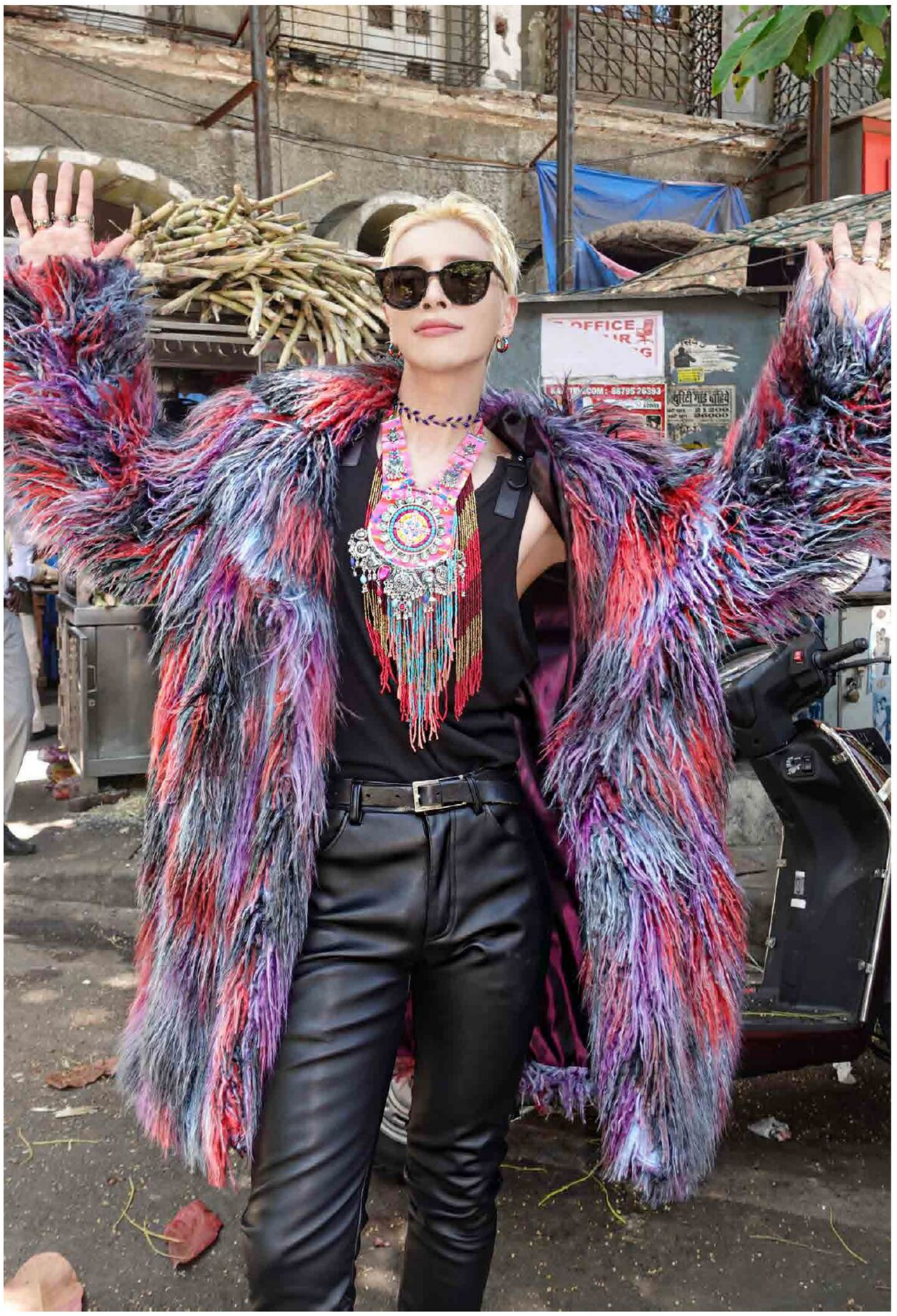
Being part of the K-pop landscape since around 2009, Aoora aka Park Min-jun, was previously part of the band Double-A and went solo in 2014. While he made a mark with singles like "Twerk" in 2020, it's only in the span of the last year that

Aoora's mashups of Indian songs mark a move towards a specific country. In an interview *Rolling Stone India*, Aoora talks about the response he's got so far and his upcoming version of R.D. Burman-composed, Kishore Kumar-sung "Yeh Shaam Mastani." Excerpts:

How has the reception been so far to the K-Pop versions of the Indian songs you've put out?
I am quite happy with the response. As it was a totally new experiment of recreating an already popular song and bringing K-pop elements in it without killing the essence of the original song, I was also curious to know how the audience would respond to it. I feel they were received well and I received a lot of love from Indian fans.

This is a very different but direct way of reaching out to an Indian audience that's familiar with K-pop but also familiar with the Bollywood songs you've chosen to work on. What informed the decision to take this route to reach Indian audiences?
I became familiar with Indian music almost a year back when I first heard the 'Cham Cham' song. I felt the energy of Indian songs – not just Bollywood but also Tamil, Telugu, Punjabi – matched with my energy and liking. I started exploring more Indian music. I wanted to explore a music genre where I could bring both Indian and K-pop music elements together. That is when we approached Saregama with this idea. They were enthusiastic about this experiment and that's how this new journey started for me.

Along the way, do you feel Korean audiences have also become more privy to the Indian/Bollywood sound through your renditions?
In [the] last one year especially after [Oscar-winning Telugu song] 'Naatu Naatu,' more and more Korean audiences have started taking interest in Indian movies and songs.



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

"I was aware that these songs are iconic songs but when I decided to do these songs, it was more because I vibed with them."

From another perspective, these are very beloved songs for Indians – like "Jimmy" and "Auva Auva" – was there an understanding that you were working with some very solid classics and had to match up to their legacy?
I was aware that these songs are iconic songs but when I decided to do these songs, it was more because I vibed with them and I felt there was huge potential to experiment and recreate K-pop versions of these songs. There was honestly no pressure and it was more of a fun and happy experience for me.

"Yeh Shaam Mastani" will be a very different rendition compared to what we've heard so far from you. What was it like working on a slower Bollywood song?
Yes. the next song we plan to release is very different and most challenging. All my previous songs have been very upbeat and more energetic.

'Yeh Shaam' is a melodious and soothing song and also very well-respected song. It is a song I would like to listen by the seaside, so everyone can look forward to a very seaside, soothing K-pop version of this song. I hope it will receive [a] lot of love.

Before this India association, you'd been known for AA/ Double-A and "Twerk" and many other songs. Does it feel like you're in a different phase or "era" right now? What will it be like to hear Aoora music in the future, what kind of direction will that go in?
I think we all grow every day. My AA phase was very interesting and fun and then I did a lot of solo work as well. My current music era, as you mention, I feel is a natural transition for me. I feel what I am doing today is what makes me happy and what I was doing before was making me happy at that time.

In the future, Aoora music will continue to grow and bring happiness to all those who hear it.

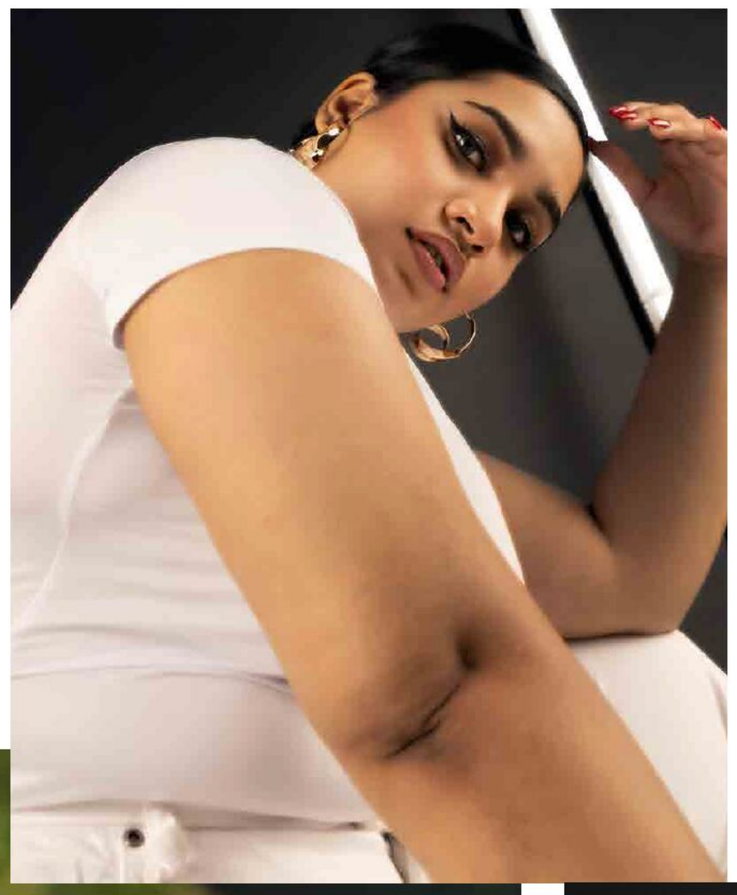
You also got to perform in India when you were here. What was the concert like?
I have done five concerts and I will be doing many more in the coming months. I have received a lot of love and warm energy from my Indian audiences. I am very grateful for the same.

What else is coming up for you through 2023?
There is lot of interesting music coming up. Not just Bollywood, but other Indian languages as well.
I plan to do my concerts across India and meet my fans all over. My fans are most precious to me and I am looking forward to closer interaction with them in coming months. ANURAG TAGAT

Bulli Bainbridge Enlists Rappers Irfana and Trichia Grace-Ann on New Single 'One Me'

The fiery track is the Mumbai-based producer's first release since his 2023 debut album 'SEASONS'

EVER SINCE RELEASING his seven-track full-length debut album *SEASONS* this past January, Mumbai-based producer Zain Calcuttawala aka Bulli Bainbridge admits to finding a new drive as an artist. He says, "I was terrified of releasing my own music, but now there's an excitement that's been added to the mix, which is pushing me to keep creating." Now, he's back with a crispy new collaboration with Kodaikanal-bred hip-hop artist Irfana and vocalist/rapper Trichia Grace-Ann on the blazing song "One Me."



(from left) Bulli Bainbridge. Trichia Grace-Ann. Irfana.

Grace-Ann featured on the song "The Queen" from *SEASONS* and Calcuttawala believes that he's formed a strong working relationship with her. "I truly believe in her artistry; she's got a lot to offer and I also know that she doesn't want to be pigeonholed either," says the producer. Once he had the beat down for "One Me," Calcuttawala shared it with Grace-Ann who recommended having Irfana on board too. "Irfana and I had spoken briefly a few times before, so I asked if she'd be game to work together. I sent her the beat and she really liked it," says Calcuttawala. He adds, "We bonded over the fact that we went to the same school, Kodaikanal International School, and she still spends a lot of her time in the town, and she penned the lyrics the last time she was there."

"One Me" includes a stomping unconventional hip-hop beat as well as Bulli Bainbridge's sonic embellishments while Irfana's hard-hitting rhymes and Grace-Ann's hooky vocals are a perfect match for the track. The song came together with all three artists sharing voice notes with each other and Calcuttawala says, "I said to Irfana and Trichia, 'I don't know if I want to be the best at what I do, but I know I want to be the only one who does what I do.' Meaning we ought to pay more attention to what really resonates with us as artists rather than wondering how the industry will label us." The producer adds, "And a lot of the time, we sometimes feel pressured to conform to some kind of idea or trend but being able to push back and do your own thing can be a really powerful statement in itself. I think both artists really understood that and expressed it with a powerful and feminine energy." Irfana recorded her parts in Goa while Calcuttawala recorded Grace-Ann's vocals at Mumbai's Island City Studios.

With "One Me" now out of the way, Bulli Bainbridge doesn't plan on slowing down and informs us that he has three more collaborations in the works currently. There's also a new version of his song "Monochrome" from *SEASONS* being worked on by electronica/orchestral duo the Bombay Dub Orchestra which includes artists Garry Hughes and Andrew T. Mackay. Calcuttawala says, "I will continue to challenge myself with different genres and various artists because I don't want to be pigeonholed into anything." **DAVID BRITTO**

COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS; PARIZAD D (BULLI BAINBRIDGE)

DJ Ishani: 'My Journey as A DJ Has Been Incredibly Blessed and Rewarding'

The Mumbai-based selector opens up about being behind the decks for over a decade

New Delhi-bred and Mumbai-based artist Ishani Majumdar aka DJ Ishani hails from a music-oriented family and she knew that music was always something she wanted to pursue. She says, "I knew it wasn't going to be the traditional classical Indian music route that my mother and my grandmother were into but since music was definitely in my blood, it was just a matter of figuring out how to make it a career in a way that suited me."

The career path that Majumdar chose is that of a DJ and she's been spinning spellbinding sets across clubs and festivals around India for more than 10 years. We recently caught up with her to talk about what her journey has been like as a DJ, some of her milestones, what she has planned going forward and more. Read below.

When did DJing first pique your interest and do you recall the first time you wanted to be a DJ?
Sometime during my college years as I was clubbing in Bombay, it struck me that this was potentially a path I could pursue, so I decided to learn DJing and never looked back since.

What's your journey been like for you as a DJ?
My journey as a DJ has been incredibly blessed and rewarding overall. I am lucky to have had people who have stood by me and supported me through the ups and downs. A lot of work associates have been incredibly helpful and have helped me further my career in ways I could never take for granted. The highlights of my career would include landing my residency at Zenzi Bandra and Zenzi Mills back in 2007. Sharing the stage with [American rapper] Wiz Khalifa at Sunburn Arena and more recently with [U.S. artist] Offset (from hip-hop Migos) and also being featured on *Mixmag* this year and being the first hip-hop DJ out of India to do so which was a huge honor. Collaborating with brands and most recently Def Jam India would also definitely be up there.

But the real highlight will always remain our weekly hip-hop nights – Hip-hop Ain't Dead – which I started with [rapper/DJ] Bobkat (from Mumbai reggae/hip-hop group Bombay Bassment) in 2014 at Ibar and then continued on at Khar Social with The Grind. The outpouring of love and support I've received for nearly nine years, every single week at these nights is phenomenal to say the least. The longest-running hip-hop night in the country and the energy is surreal.

How has the DJ scene changed since you first started?
When I first started DJing there were hardly any female DJs aside from the four or five big names in the industry, half of which were only playing Bollywood music. It wasn't very common for women working in the nightlife business owing to family and societal pressures. But today we're in a completely different world and it's so good to see so many women in this field across all genres. It's no longer as male-dominated as it once was which is amazing.

What are you currently working on and what's the plan going forward?
I still aspire to hit many venues and locations across the country and maybe even abroad and to sample hip-hop from many different backgrounds and cultures because hip-hop is now global. When I got into hip hop I realized there was a rich heritage to this culture and listening only to the contemporary stuff would not give a sufficient picture of the beauty that the music and the culture represent. So, I've always made it a point to stay abreast with the latest releases as I constantly keep delving back into the past and that is the essence of the sets that I like to play. I'm inspired by artists in the hip-hop space who have had longevity and have stayed relevant over a period of decades. Artists who have been able to also venture into other entrepreneurial spaces have still come back to music and done so successfully. **DAVID BRITTO**

NIRANJAN PATWARDHAN

Huyana Hits All the Right Notes On R&B-Laced Debut EP 'Anxious Attachment'

The four-track record also spans the Bengaluru-based singer-songwriter's influences from jazz and blues to pop and soul music

LEKHA RATNAM

LAST MONTH, Bengaluru-based singer-songwriter Varshita Ramesh aka Huyana released the R&B/soul leaning lead single, "Can't Fall / Won't Fall," off her debut EP *Anxious Attachment*. Now, Ramesh is out with the full four-track record, and she says, "All four songs were written when I was between 19 and 22, I turn 25 in September [and] I finally reached a point in November 2022 when I decided they had evolved enough and were now ready to be recorded and released."

For *Anxious Attachment*, Ramesh tapped Bengaluru artist Derek Mathias from jazz outfit Derek & The Cats to produce the EP. With this being Ramesh's debut EP, it was also Mathias' first time in the producer's chair for an artist other than himself. "Derek and I made every single decision together, and there was a lot of trust – not just between us, but also amongst all the other musicians on this record," says Ramesh. She adds, "I think the entire process of recording and production was very smooth and well-planned. We met all deadlines while ensuring there was breathing space and next to no creative burnouts."

Anxious Attachment opens with "Can't Fall / Won't Fall" before we hear the moving "If Only." The EP's penultimate song is the emotional ballad "Breezy" before the record closes with the stirring "Crush." Talking about the songs, Ramesh says, "It's almost like it traces a journey of being delusional in love, in denial, acceptance and awareness of how much you've surrendered to the other person... It's exactly how you would treat relationships when you're younger and not wiser or you're someone who just has the anxious attachment style."

Sonically, the EP plays to Ramesh's strengths with plenty of her R&B, jazz and blues influences creeping in while there's even pop, Gospel and country soundscapes too. On her part, the singer delivers mellifluous vocals, catchy melodies as well as introspective lyrics "All the sounds are live and nostalgic. The decision to use live horns, synths, specific electric guitar tones all was based on wanting it to tug at heartstrings and remind people of things they have felt and are currently feeling," says Ramesh.

The singer-songwriter is currently on her four-city 'Kind-Of-A-Tour' which includes seven dates. With shows at Bengaluru's The Raft and a set in Kochi as part of global music community Sofar Sounds already done, Ramesh will now be heading to Mumbai where she will be hosting a listening session for her EP on July 14th at Headphone Zone, followed by a secret set on July 15th, after which she'll play a ticketed gig at Harkat Studios on the 16th. On July 21st she travels to Chennai for a show at Bay 146 before wrapping up the tour back in Bengaluru with another secret gig on July 29th. "Through this tour, we get to play the songs on the EP in so many different ways – acoustic, with a large band, and even a stripped-down set-up. It's great, and very exciting and a lot of work," says Ramesh.

These sets of shows will be some of the last gigs Ramesh plays in India for a while before she leaves for Rotterdam in August to pursue a Masters's in Songwriting at Codarts University. The artist says, "I've decided that I need to take some time off work, go back to being a student and spend the next two years practicing and up-skilling before moving on to the next phase of my career."

Looking ahead, Ramesh is keen on putting together her full-length debut album, although she says she needs some time after working on *Anxious Attachment*. "I definitely need to spend some time just writing for fun. There might be a single or two more coming out this year though, you never know," she says. **DAVID BRITTO**

Liza Lyngdoh Unleashes Soaring Single 'COLD'

The track is off the Meghalaya musician's forthcoming debut EP 'Magical Elixir'

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Born just outside of Shillong in Meghalaya in a village called Mawten, Mawkyrwat, guitar virtuoso and singer Liza Lyngdoh was mesmerized when she heard one of her teachers play the piano at church while attending KJP Girls Higher Secondary School in Shillong. Lyngdoh says, "I always look forward to getting a chance to hear her play. Her sound was so beautiful and captivating that it has left me wanting more and that has created a strong interest for me in music." Since Lyngdoh found it difficult to get her hands on a piano or keyboard, she instead settled for an old guitar that was laying around her school hostel where she boarded. "I fell in love with it and have never stopped since then," she says.

Although Lyngdoh has released music with her previous bands, she's now branched out as a solo artist and has just put out her debut single, the soaring "COLD," off her upcoming four-track EP *Magical Elixir*. The new song includes some stellar fretwork by Lyngdoh as well as her crisp vocals. Overall, the track includes elements of heavy metal, prog rock and even a stirring guitar solo. Talking about the track, she says, "I write lyrics based on my life experience and this is one of them."

The musician has also released a video to accompany the song in which she's seen performing the track in various looks. In the clip, Lyngdoh sports a red and white outfit as an ode to the late American guitar great Eddie Van Halen as he wears those same colors during his famous performance of "Eruption." The singer-guitarist says, "He is one of my favorite guitar players." On putting the video together, Lyngdoh adds, "It was tough, really hard for me because I'm very shy. But somehow I did it, thanks to the director and my kind friends at Wire Up, Bengaluru who let me shoot there with no hesitation at all."

The songs on the forthcoming *Magical Elixir* are tracks that Lyngdoh began writing while she was in school. She says, "I've named it *Magical Elixir* in reference to music being a very magical element in my life, almost like a tonic that I couldn't live without." The rest of the EP is due to be released in the coming weeks.

DAVID BRITTO

Naisha Declares Independence with New Song 'Wallah'

The track has been produced by U.S.-based artists Fki 1st and Justin Rose

SINCE RELEASING her two-track debut EP *Back & Fort*h in 2022, singer-songwriter, model, actress, writer and DJ Naisha Bhargabi – who goes by her first name as an artist – moved from Mumbai to Los Angeles after being signed to modeling agency LA Models. She says, "It's definitely been a journey just setting myself up and starting from scratch in a different country." While in L.A., Naisha has continued to DJ and has also been working on new music too. The artist recently released her latest R&B/Afropop single, "Wallah," produced by Fki 1st and Justin Rose.

In this interview with *Rolling Stone India*, Naisha talks to us about the new song, the track's upcoming video and her future plans. Read below.

"'Wallah' was a very impromptu record, out of all the stuff I have been working on 'Wallah' just came super naturally."

When did you write "Wallah" and what can you tell us about the song?

'Wallah' was a very impromptu record, out of all the stuff I have been working on 'Wallah' just came super naturally. We were in the studio 1st, Justin and me and it just kind of flew so easy almost like a spontaneous freestyle amongst us. I wanted to make a summer tune and it's more so about feeling yourself, a self-love type of vibe. I try to stray away from negative or forlorn love songs. Those are always fun to write, but I think this is more of a challenge. And I wanted to make this for all the baddies around the world, it's super light and breezy.

Do you have any visuals planned for this track?

With this release I'm being super spontaneous as it's summer and just being an independent artist for now I have that freedom. So we definitely have a fire music video shot here in L.A. and I want to drop it soon but I want the song to get its own space too without a face to it. I'm not sure when I'm dropping it but definitely it's going to be coming out in the next few weeks.

What else are you currently working on?

I'm working on multiple projects together including my album. That work never stops. It's just about packaging the right records at the right time, but there's a lot of music in the works and I can't wait to share it with the world. DAVID BRITTO

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Nikitaa Ascends the 'Throne' In New Video

The track follows the Los Angeles-based artist's single 'Peter Pan' from earlier this year

After releasing her single "Peter Pan" this past May, Los Angeles-based artist Nikitaa found her songwriting style changing ever since she came out as gender-fluid as well as a lot of other things shifting around in her life too. She says, "I've just been in a lot of sessions figuring out what I want to write about for myself, and then also I've been writing for other folks recently, so that's been most of my life for the past couple of months."

Now, Nikitaa is out with a brand new single in the shape of the gritty-pop number "Throne." The song is also accompanied by a striking music video in which Nikitaa is seen performing the song with a choreographed dance. In this interview with *Rolling Stone India*, the artist talks about the new track, making the video, what's next and more. Read below.

When did work on "Throne" begin and how did the song come together?

I had the concept for 'Throne' in April. We were three sessions in, and it was done. Honestly, it was a silly thought that came to me late at night. I was sitting around, and I've been single for a while and I've been going on dates, and I recently stopped because the men here are just absolute garbage and there's only so much you could take at a time and I was just sitting and I was like, 'I just want a good throne to sit on.' I got tired of writing about bad situations and romance and my pain, I just wanted to write something fun. We started pulling up references and we definitely looked at and listened to a lot of Renaissance because I kind of wanted to showcase queer music specifically because I hadn't really delved into that.

What was it like putting the video together?

The video was interesting because I had a vision for the video. I wanted choreography, but I'd never shot a video where I had done choreography just by myself. I had these grand ideas, but I'm still indie, so I'm still working on this tight budget. I used to be a professional dancer and I've been avoiding it because I injured my knee last year, but also because over the pandemic because I caught COVID I gained weight and I looked very different. I was so used to seeing myself as this thinner person and it was such a big part of my identity. So I was avoiding it for a really long time. I used to feel really conscious, but I just said fuck it. I don't want to think about that anymore, I know I can do this.

On set it was really interesting because I'm gender fluid and everyone else, they were women and queer people on set. It was a very small crew. I think I was dancing for four hours I was sore for like a whole week after and my knees are still bruised till today. But it was a lot of fun. We ended up finding a set that had the laser and the LED screen and everything all in one location, which is another cool thing about L.A., is spaces like that exist.

"On set [for the video] it was really interesting because I'm gender fluid and everyone else, they were women and queer people on set."

What are you currently working on at the moment?

There's a few concepts flying around and they're all really fun. It's really interesting because this year has kind of been emotionally and mentally really difficult for me. Coming out is always hard, even though most of the people in my life have been super supportive, some of them have not and it takes its toll on you. And being in a country like America or really being anywhere and being queer is not easy. So, it's been a really hard year, but the music that's been coming out of it has been really light-hearted and just really silly in some ways. But also, really empowering because it's light-hearted and silly.

DAVID BRITTO

KARLY KIEFER

Peekay Returns to Rock Roots on New Album Starlight

Hyderabad artist and entrepreneur Pranati Khanna's six-track full-length evokes catharsis, especially with the lead single "No Ordinary"

PEEKAY AKA Pranati Khanna's new album *Starlight* is dedicated to anyone that loved rock, pop and alt rock growing up and the Hyderabad artist-entrepreneur says it's "especially" for the "emo kids."

The six-track record comes with a music video for "No Ordinary," which stands testament to Peekay's love for adrenaline-fueled, openhearted rock. The video – directed by Apoo Mahi and Hari Charan – features Peekay, Mahi, and classical dancers Vaibhav Modi and Nenita Praveen. The surging song is Peekay's way of delivering a rock anthem for all those who consider themselves "a little left of center." She adds in a statement, "It's okay to be 30 and unmarried, running a digital marketing agency and releasing rock music independently amidst a sea of hip-hop and Bollywood. Be honest to who you are because amidst this world of posers, being authentic is indeed 'No Ordinary' thing."

Starlight comes after a number of genre experiments from Peekay, including more pop and R&B songs like "Squeaky Clean" and "Sunshine on the Street" (with Shillong artist and actor Andrea Tariang) in 2022. The artist, who admits she was trying "fitting in with the cool kids" on prior material, describes it as a "cathartic" experience to put out *Starlight*. She adds, "Jazz and R&B makes me good money for commercial gigs but I can't write honestly in that genre for shit. I couldn't. This album is the proudest moment for me and this album is my most honest and possibly best lot of songwriting till date and the beginning of a much heavier sound to come."

She harkens back to her days leading indie rock band The Ragamuffins (who later became Spell Check) and feels she needs to go back to that if she ever intends to be happy as an artist. "The point of being an artist Is to be honest with yourself. Release music. Tell real stories. Be honest. Raw. I wasn't doing that with R&B/pop. I always did that with rock," she adds.

As it turns out, the rock songs were being written for *Starlight* over the last three years, even as Peekay was releasing more pop, jazz and R&B-informed singles. Produced Jonathan Edward and mixed and mastered by Keshav Dhar, the album starts with a sparkling intro and kicks into gear with "What a Shame" that entices with a guitar solo, while "Fever Dream" chugs along at a hair-raising, emo-turned-grand pace. "No Ordinary" is the steely centerpiece of *Starlight*, while there's more trippy terrain explored on "Wanna Be Bad." The title track closes the record, with Peekay's storytelling voice shining through best on a prog-leaning tune.

"This album is the proudest moment for me and this album is my most honest and possibly best lot of songwriting till date and the beginning of a much heavier sound to come."

Peekay says it won't be too much of a challenge to take *Starlight* on the road, considering that she's always had a rock band. She adds, "The rock band had to alter their minds to fit the R&B/pop avatar for the last year or so. So Eddy, Alex, Rex and I are just happy to be back to our original selves, comfortable in our own skin and playing rock. Like back when we were The Ragamuffins, if anyone remembers us." ANURAG TAGAT

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Aamir Rizvi Releases Soothing New Song 'always/on my mind'

The track is the Kolkata singer-songwriter's seventh release

20-YEAR-OLD Kolkata-based singer-songwriter Aamir Rizvi recalls that during his first guitar lesson, his teacher called his mother and told her that he could never become a guitar player because of his "thick chubby fingers." "Even though I was seven at the time, some part of me wanted to get better and move forward with this," he says. Rizvi would go on to play guitar throughout his schooling years and in 2016 wrote his first song entitled "Run Away," which he later released as his debut single in 2018.

After consulting with Mumbai-based singer-songwriter Raghav Meattle and guitarist Ehsaan Noorani (from composer trio Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy), Rizvi decided to take music much more seriously and began gigging heavily in Kolkata from 2020 onwards while also becoming a guitar tutor himself and continuing to release singles. Now, he's out with his seventh single, the comforting "always/on my mind."

The new song includes delicate acoustic guitar plucking over melodic electric guitar playing, Rizvi's breezy vocals, atmospheric soundscapes, a rustic solo and more. "The entire concept of the song doesn't revolve around heartbreak or sadness, but I would like to call it a thank you note instead. I wrote this for my high school girlfriend who changed my life in the best way possible."

"The entire concept of the song doesn't revolve around heartbreak or sadness, but I would like to call it a thank you note instead."

In the coming week, Rizvi is all set to play shows at New Delhi's Depot 48 on July 14th, Gurugram's AMPM the following day and at the Broadway Hotel in Kolkata on July 16th. With a full-length album ready too, the singer-songwriter is plotting to release the music sometime in 2024. He says, "After the gigs, I'll be taking some time off to practice my craft a bit more so my sound can be enhanced. Being a musician is super fun, but it's also important to rest." DAVID BRITTO

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Tanmaya Bhatnagar: 'I Truly Believe That Women Can Change the World'

The singer-songwriter recently performed at Rolling Stone India's Women in Creativity event in Mumbai

THE LAST TIME we interviewed New Delhi singer-songwriter Tanmaya Bhatnagar was when she released her four-track debut EP *Wherever I Go, I'd Like To Be All I Need* in 2021. Since then, she tells us that she's been growing and evolving both as a person and an artist. She says, "[I've been] traveling, figuring things out, figuring life out and of course creating a lot of music and poetry to put out and most importantly writing a lot for myself. Being an artist is truly an emotional ride and I think now I'm knee-deep in it."

Bhatnagar – who performed at *Rolling Stone India*'s Women in Creativity event in Mumbai this past May – talks to us about what it was like to be part of it, her set at Lollapalooza India earlier this year, her latest release and more. Read below.

Earlier this year you performed at Lollapalooza India, what was that experience like for you?

It was exhilarating in all aspects. Truly was a big deal for me to be on that lineup. Leading up to the festival I was a big ball of stress. Managing my full-time job as a graphic designer and being my own manager, coordinator of logistics, the band and prepping for the gig was not a cakewalk. However, in the end, I was really happy with how things turned out. My time on stage was unforgettable. It felt like I truly belonged on that stage. I will never forget that experience and I hope I continue to get such opportunities.

What was it like for you to be part of and perform at *Rolling Stone India*'s Women in Creativity event?

It was lovely. I truly believe that women can change the world – heck they are changing the world right now! I have so much love and admiration for women in this business and so many of them were in that room that day. I would love to be part of all the future events that celebrate women in creativity in any capacity. Performing and sharing my stories with people is always special, especially with women, so many of them came up to me later to interact with me about the songs and it filled my heart with joy.

Why do you think having an event like this is important?

Because these events are so rare, and they shouldn't be. Women in the field of creativity are so special and brilliant. What they bring to the world of creativity and business is extremely important. And it's true, when women support each other – it's so empowering and magical and that kind of support is incomparable because women always come to the table from a place of love and compassion and that's what makes them powerful! This is also such a great way for us to meet and mingle to be able to support each other and get to know one another on a human level.

What's coming up next from you?

My new song called 'Izhaar' has just been released. All I want to say about this project is that it was one of the first songs I wrote on the piano and I'm very proud of its authenticity. It's inspired by love and anything that is inspired by love is pure. DAVID BRITTO

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Leah Kate Channels Her Inner 'Gone Girl' in New Video For 'Super Over'

The track follows a string of successful releases from the American artist

When we catch up with American singer-songwriter/pop artist Leah Kate over Zoom, she's just finished making her debut television appearance on *Good Day New York*. Reliving the experience, she says, "It was really cool. It was super fun, and it was crazy. I had a blast." Kate performed her latest release on the show, the angsty "Super Over."

The last time we spoke to Kate was in 2021 when she released her seven-track EP *What Just Happened?* Although the singer was already blowing up at the time, in the past two years her stock has risen even further. With her follow-up EP, 2022's eight-track *Alive and Unwell* which includes the smash hit "10 Things I Hate About You," Kate saw tremendous success that led her to tour with American singer Madison Beer as well as head out on tours of her own across the U.S., U.K., Europe and Australia. "The last two years was touring and touring," she says.

According to Kate, "Super Over" is a start of a new era for her. The artist says, "I wrote 'Super Over' because I was actually very heartbroken over someone, and I needed an anthem for myself. I wrote it as my official, 'I'm cutting you off forever anthem.' I was really hurt and just needed a song to help me move on." The track itself includes a gritty beat and falls in between pop music and punk rock as distorted guitars ring out during the choruses while the verses are quieter and more angelic. Kate on her part delivers unabashed lyrics while her infectious and catchy melodies shine throughout the song.

The music video accompanying "Super Over" sees Kate perform the track in a house with choreographed dancing and showcases her unapologetic self. She says, "I always had a very big vision for this video. I really wanted a video that I felt could break the internet so I wanted to go all out." The singer adds, "It kind of takes after the [2014 American psychological thriller] *Gone Girl plot*, which was really fun."

In 2021, Kate explained that she overcame insecurities she had at the time regarding releasing her music. Ask her how she feels these days? She says, "I feel like I grow in this industry every day. Every day is a new emotional roller coaster and I'm always learning something." Currently, Kate is putting together her full-length debut album and is also plotting a headline tour in the near future. On the upcoming record, she says, "I've been spending every day perfecting the track list and just putting it all together and it's been crazy, but really, really fun and exciting." Kate adds, "I've been working on this for two years, so finally seeing it come together, doing the visuals, just bringing it to life is super fun." DAVID BRITTO

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Seo In-guk as Dud and Park So-dam as Death in the Upcoming K-Drama 'Death's Game'

This may be a superb fantasy K-drama that director Ha Byung-hoon intends to give thanks to its story and its cast roster.

A loser opts for death. But as an effect of his frivolous mindset, Death enters to chastise him by causing him to die in succession through 12 incarnations before damnation.

WHAT IS THE BIG thing that you are looking forward to? The bigger picture, I mean. Do you have a dream project on your mind? I had asked the lionized Seo In-guk in our interview with him. The Korean superstar's prompt answer underscored his allegiance to what he wants. "I want to concentrate on being a better actor and singer and express myself better. I want to exhibit my stronger sides by selecting good scripts, characters, and genres." That remains a constant in his life's trajectory. He is an actor who breaks habits, welcomes fresh perspectives, and strives to be the finest artist he can be.

His archive of super hits, including *Master's Sun* (2013), High School *King of Savvy* (2014), *Hello Monster* (2015), *Squad 38* (2016), *Shopping King Louie* (2016), *The Smile Has Left Your Eyes* (2018), *Doom at Your Service* (2021), and *Café Minamdang* (2022), is an extension of his experienced decision-making, consciousness, and thrill. With his follow-up projects—Death's Game in this instance—he ought to have ramped that up.

The outline of *Death's Game*, drawing on the acclaimed webtoon of the same name by Lee Won-sik and GGulchan, is rather intriguing. Choi Yi-Jae (Seo), a full-blown loser, opts for death because he is sick of being one. But as an effect of his frivolous mindset, Death (Park So-dam) enters to chastise him by causing him to die in succession through 12 incarnations before damnation. That may help him realize how worthwhile life is when the events that follow unfold.

Death will unavoidably instinctively overrun the screen, gain control, and leave nothing with a chance to be noteworthy in Park So-dam's representation of it. I'm looking forward to seeing her in a K-drama at her most expressive for the first time in a while. I'm curious how she and Seo will collaborate in the game of death she drags him into and the epic that unfolds with an extensive accompanying cast. The most compelling proof of the superb fantasy K-drama that director Ha Byung-hoon intends to give lies in its cast roster, also featuring Kim Ji-hoon, Choi Si-won, Sung Hoon, Kim Kang-hoon, Jang Seung-jo, Lee Jae-wook, Lee Do-hyun, Go Youn-jung, Kim Jae-wook, and Oh Jung-se.

This December marks the planned release of *Death's Game*. **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

TVING, COURTESY OF HANCINEMA

Netflix Has Taken on 'Yellow Door': In Search of Director Bong Joon-ho's Unreleased Short Film

It follows the course of uncovering Bong's maiden work of cinema: 'Looking for Paradise,' a stop-motion short he made decades ago.

SINCE IT EMERGED that *Netflix* has taken on *Yellow Door: In Search of Director Bong Joon-ho's Unreleased Short Film* (or rather, *Yellow Door*), a documentary diving through its origin, I've been very keen to seek out details on this practically untraceable subject. Being the major fan of the filmmaker that I am, anything Bong Joon-ho grabs my eye. His inventiveness in drawing out the stark contrasts common to Korean culture is unbelievable. How he blends that with an artistic sense into entertainment utterly unlike anything else defines him for me. It follows that an account taking me back to his genesis is one I'd anxiously await.

Bong enrolled in Yonsei University, allegedly one of those Korean institutes that served as the core of democratic motions, in 1988. There, he was actively engaging in student demonstrations. Before returning to college in 1992, he fulfilled his military service, and later, in partnership with close-by college students, he founded the "Yellow Door" film club. The documentary at hand takes its title from that society; it follows the course of uncovering Bong's maiden work of cinema: *Looking for Paradise*, a stop-motion short he made as an essential part of Yellow Door.

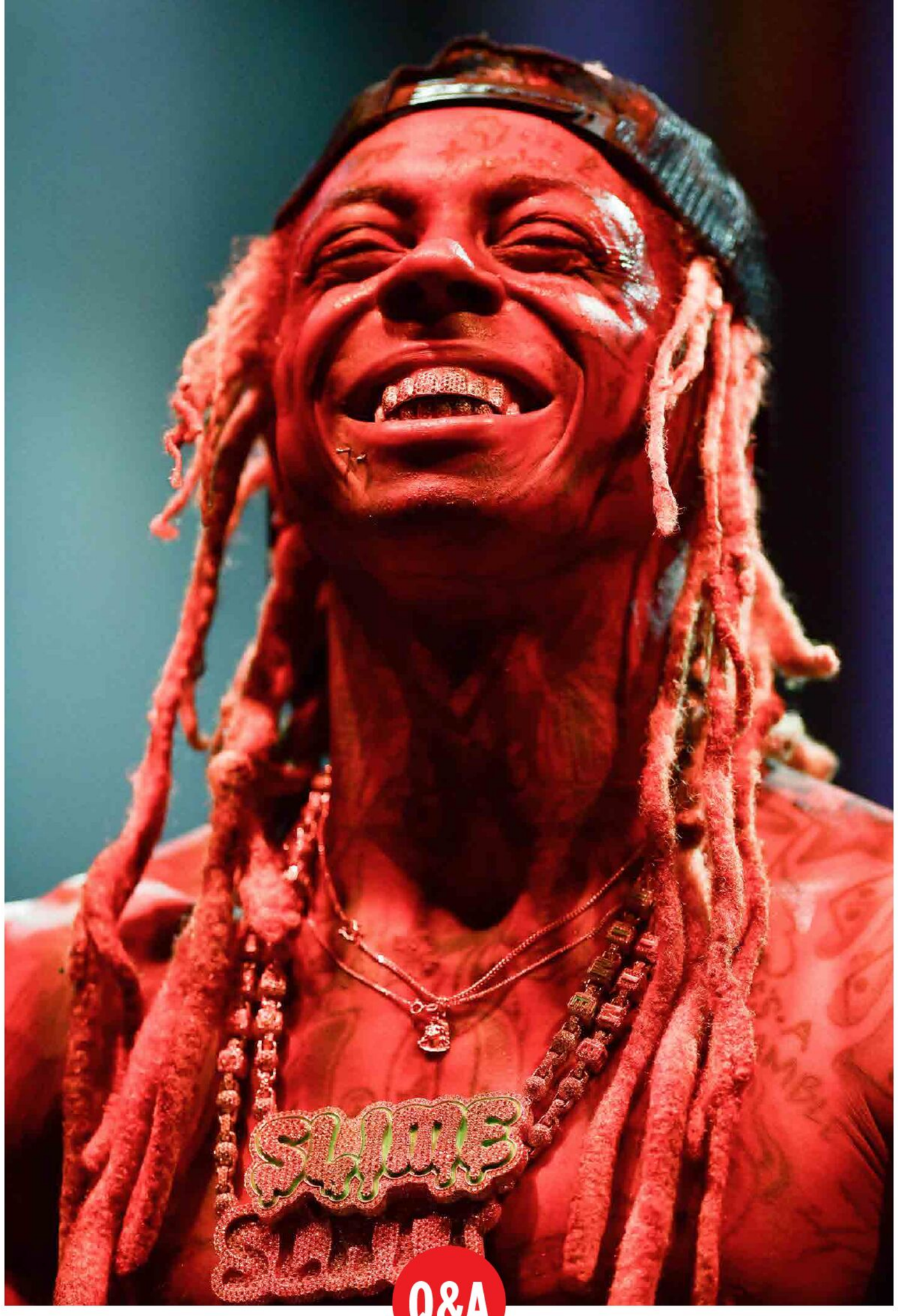
The work, however, was never made public. In fact, *White Man*, a 16mm short film chronicling a man's bizarre response to spotting a severed index finger on his way to work, is cited as Bong's directorial debut. The film premiered in 1994, prior to his graduation from Yonsei University the following year. But technically, preceding *White Man*, Bong had *Looking for Paradise*, exclusively shown to a group of Yellow Door club members on Christmas Day in 1992.

According to Korean news reports, producer Kim Hyung-ok of Broccoli Pictures and director Lee Hyuk-rae, a fellow Yellow Door member and a viewer of *Looking for Paradise*, were the driving forces behind the documentary. Lee, who heads up the initiative, spoke with the club associates (who had seen the film), notably actors Woo-hyeon, Ahn Nae-sang, and director Choi Jong-tae, for their thoughts on it while also reflecting on an era of movie buffs in the early 1990s: their recollections of the film club and Bong overseeing its video library. It will additionally record personal anecdotes from Bong himself.

Lee says in a KOFICE (Korea Foundation for International Culture Exchange) article that the documentary promises to give viewers a chance to peek into Bong Joon-ho's formative years. Also noteworthy should be the portrayal of an age in Korean cinema that saw the rise of artistic ventures amid a creative boom that followed Korea's protracted occupation by an exacting iron rule. It is scheduled to stream this year; I hope that comes soonest. **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

The documentary promises a peek into Bong Joon-ho's formative years. Also noteworthy should be the portrayal of an age in Korean cinema that saw the rise of artistic ventures.

PHOTO COURTESY OF IMDB



Q&A

Lil Wayne

The rapper on staying motivated, wanting to play the Super Bowl, and why he'll be working forever

BY ANDRE GEE

When Lil WAYNE hops on Zoom one recent afternoon, he's on a tour bus in California between stops on his Welcome to Tha Carter Tour, where he's been performing at more-intimate venues to better engage his fans this spring. Even with his Grammy Awards, platinum plaques, and a claim to rap GOAT status, he says that he has "so far" to go until he's satisfied.

"The true artists and pioneers, they never retire," Wayne, 40, tells me, noting that he has no plans to stop rhyming. He's been locked in the studio nearly every day for almost three decades now, building a catalog of songs so expansive that he can't even try to estimate the size of it. He recently finalized *ColleGrove 2*, a sequel to his 2016 collaboration album with 2 Chainz; they're waiting for sample clearances before it's released. Wayne is mum on *Carter VI*, the latest entry in his flagship album series, but his February "Kant Nobody" single with Swizz Beatz (and DMX vocal samples) indicates that he's been working on that as well. This year marks the 15th anniversary of his star-making *Carter III* album (which he's celebrating with a vinyl release), but Wayne tells me it's not a big deal to him. He's too focused on recording his next set of rhymes.

How do you view *Tha Carter III* 15 years later? What role do you feel that project plays in your catalog?
I'm going to be so honest with you: I don't know *Tha Carter III, Tha Carter II, Tha Carter One* from *Tha Carter IV*. And that's just my God's honest truth. You could lie, you could ask me [about] such and such song, I wouldn't even know what we talking about. So it holds no significance to me at all.

Even with the highs and firsts you had in 2008, it's not any different to you?
Nah, I don't even know if that's when *Tha Carter III* came out. That's how much I don't know. I work every day, bro — every single day. And also, I always look at it as the curse part of the gift and the curse. I believe that [God] blessed me with this amazing mind, but would not give [me] an amazing memory to remember this amazing shit.

So you have *Tha Carter* series, plus mixtapes like *The Drought, The Dedication, No Ceilings, Sorry 4 the Wait* — a lot of different project series. How do you differentiate creatively?
All of them have their own approach. If it's a *Tha Carter* song, I approach it with a *Carter*-song effect. Some mixtapes I [rhyme over] all the songs that are recently out, that are hot songs. And I approach those the same way the original artist approached them. I just say different words. If it's a mixtape with DJ Drama, then I know Drama's going to want a lot of original songs. But the way I approach those, I say whatever the hell I want, because I know that's what Drama wants.

I'm assuming there's not a favorite project series.
Oh, yeah. Not a favorite at all. My favorite song is the last one I record. And then I will forget it after the next one I record.

How much are you driven by still wanting to be known as the best rapper alive?
Every single action, every single word, every single approach. The reason why I'm still only listening and working on my own shit is because I'm in it. I believe once you start trying to listen to everybody else, you ain't in it no more. You just happy to be here. But not me. I'm in a gym working on my own game. I don't care how high you jumping. I don't care how fast you run. You can't even stand next to me with that shit.

Keeping with that basketball metaphor, Michael Jordan doesn't get to play against Kevin Durant or LeBron James at this point, but you get to go up against rappers of the new generation. How motivated are you by showing the next generation you're still that dude?
The motivation isn't to show them that I'm still that dude, which I am. The motivation is to show them *why* I'm still that dude. That's the motivation, because I want them to hopefully get something from that and they continue to still be whoever the dude or woman they are.

I saw that Teyana Taylor and NLE Choppa recently gave you gifts: exclusive Air Jordan 1s from Teyana, and a slew of things — including a chain — from NLE Choppa. Do you often get gifts from other artists?
Not often at all [*laughs*]. And you know what? That's a sign of the new age. Their humility level was out of the stratosphere compared to what ours was. We had this bravado: "I'm better than you. My clique better than your clique." You ain't had no artist saying, "Hey, man, let me give you this." I ain't going to lie, the Ruff Ryders always had something to give you when you come to New York, so they was cool. But other than that, they ain't giving you no damn gifts and shit.

What other traits have you noticed from interacting with younger artists that are different from prior generations?
You can get comfortable quick as an artist these days because of social media. You can work your ass off and put a song out and people like it, and all of a sudden somebody comes and eat a pencil and that person

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gets a billion likes more than you. It's a different world. When we was doing this, we had a sense of knowing that this is what we are doing and you're liking it or loving it because you like it or love us. These kids know that whatever they doing, you could just swipe left or swipe right and there's another person doing it too. So it is a lot they have to deal with.

How many songs are you knocking out in a day?

I work on multiple songs a day. I probably look at 20 verses a day. I'm on my bus right now. I have a studio set up on this bus. We have a studio bus behind me. In every hotel we get to, before I get to the room, my two engineers set up a studio in the bedroom. And I told you, we already have a studio booked in that city if that city has a nice studio, meaning I don't stop working.

Even on tour.

What? Yeah, even on tour. What? I'd be at my kid's graduation with a studio if they had one [*laughs*].

Has there been a particular instance when an artist said something about your influence that really touched you?

I would say every time because it's unexpected. But the most recent would be the homeboy NLE Choppa. People got to see him give me the chain, but when I went to shoot the video with him and [talked with] him over the phone, [I realized] that kid is very different. It's amazing to see a person like him. But other than that, 2 Chainz did a whole song about me. Then I saw something else where someone's filming themselves rapping a song and it was a whole ode to me, but it was rapping it to "A Milli" the way I rap "A Milli." And speaking of "A Milli," you see Tyga shoot a whole video referencing videos I've shot?

What are some things that are still out there that you'd still like to accomplish as a musician?

Oh, man. I'm so fucking far from that. What? The Grammys just started to say what's up to me. Every time I meet a fan, the first thing they going to tell me is the things that I haven't accomplished. And I love it, because I be like, "You're right, man. I'm pissed off about that too. I'm trying to get that too, man."

So when you say "far from," what is it that you feel like—

It's a bunch. That's a whole 'nother interview, man. There's a whole bunch of things I haven't done that I've seen other folks do that I've said to myself, "Man, I'd kill it if I had that opportunity." Super Bowl, hint, hint.

How would you feel about doing the Super Bowl?

What? "*How would you feel?*" I'd kill that shit. We wouldn't even worry about the game after that. Everybody knew that one kid [who] was watching the halftime show, but that'd be one of the first Super Bowls that they'll be like, "Both teams were out on the field watching the halftime show."

You've been performing at big venues for a long time. Was there a point where you missed intimate venues and wanted to get back to this kind of tour?

Yeah, that was the whole reason. Just for the simple fact of embracing my fans. They love the fuck out of me.

I see there's talk of a *ColleGrove 2,* a sequel to your collab album with 2 Chainz, coming out. I was wondering if you could give an update on where things are with that process?

We've been finished with *ColleGrove.* Me and Tit [2 Chainz], every time we get together, we record. We got, like, 39 million songs. But he been putting it together. He was just waiting to get certain samples cleared. He's very persistent. So sometimes when things don't get cleared, he'll go to the umpteenth to get it cleared. So shit, once he say when, that's when we going.

I saw that your videographer Phil gave you a pro skateboard in December. Have you actually used it?

Oh, yeah, that's my pro model. All my homies skate the pro model. We all skate.

Would you ever enter a skate contest, given that you've been skating for so long?

Oh, no. Hell no. That's what I have a skate team for. And that's what it was all about anyway, just giving back and opening doors for those kids. They do this shit the way that I rap.

You don't feel like you're quite of their caliber?

Nah, we ain't entering no competitions or nothing. Also, there's different forms of skating. There's competition skating, there's vert skating, there's street skating, and there's training skating. I'm a street skater. So my whole platform in skating is putting out a video.

Who are you listening to these days?

When it comes to rap, I don't listen to no one. I just don't have time to, because I'm trying to get better every day. I tell my own artist that, too. When you find a favorite artist, you're going to start sounding like them. It took Birdman and them to pull my ass aside and be like, "Bro, I'm tired of every song you doing sounding like damn Jay-Z. You're not Jay-Z."

How did you take it when he said that? Is that something you were cognizant of?

Yeah, I was glad it was working [*laughs*]. That's like, "Oh, good, it's working."

How much longer do you see yourself rapping? Do you ever think about retirement?

When you work the way I work, it gets strenuous, and it might flash. And even when you say it, I don't think you actually mean stop working or doing music. You probably just mean you want to retire from everything else *but* the music [*laughs*]. When you're an artist — a real artist like myself, I was born this way. So I don't think that the real true artists and pioneers, they never retire. They died doing this.

I saw DJ Toomp talk about a memorable studio session with you, 2 Chainz, and Benny the Butcher. What do you remember from that session?

That was a rap session. That was one of them "Cash Money flew to New York and we done ended up in the same studio with Dipset [or] Ruff Ryders [sessions]." That's one of them old sessions [you] used to see on VHS or something, where you see Fat Joe in there, you might see Jada, all them in one studio, and that's one of them sessions.

Could you put an estimate on how large your vault of unreleased music is?

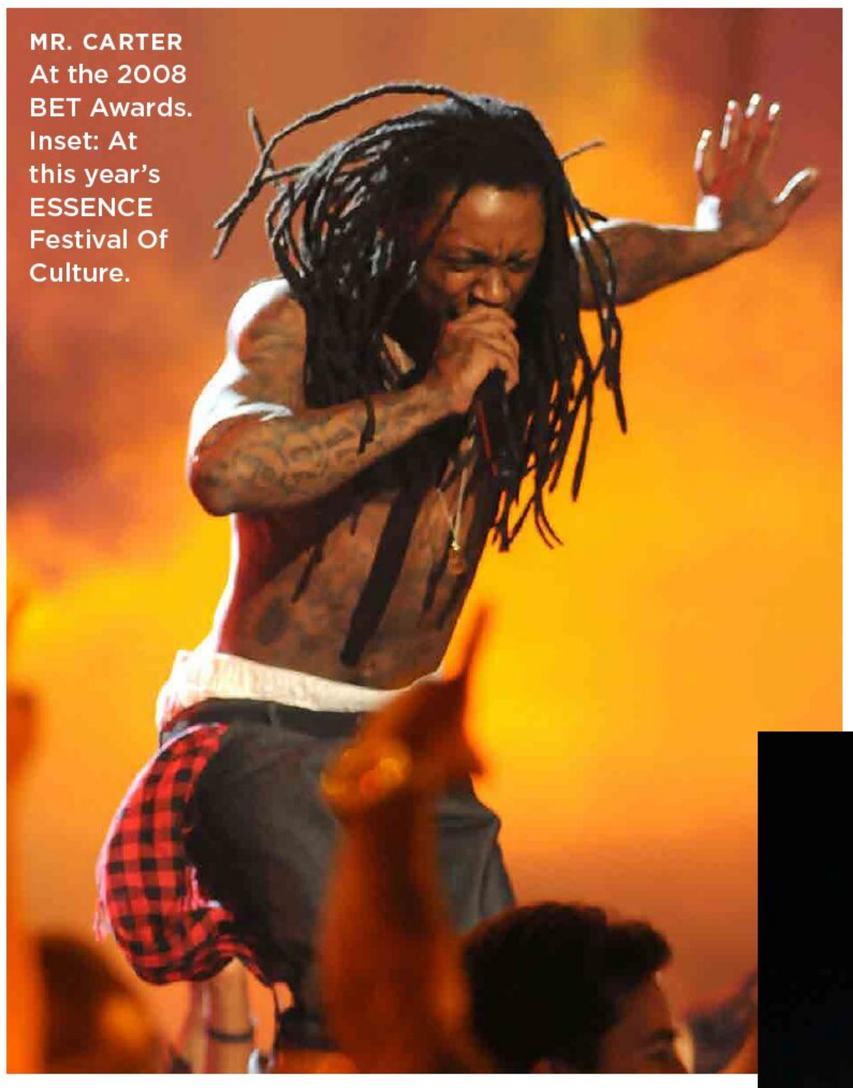
My drive goes back to 2010, and that's just this computer. So that means that number isn't even possible to even fathom. You probably got a million songs in one year.

I've seen a lot of Lil Wayne *Verzuz* talk. Are you interested in doing one, and which artist would you be interested in competing with?

I was interested in Mixtape Weezy going against Lil Wayne. That would have been crazy.

So you'd be onstage by yourself?

Yeah. What other artists you think? There ain't no other artist that can stand on the stage next to me, bro. I'm sorry. ®



MR. CARTER At the 2008 BET Awards. Inset: At this year's ESSENCE Festival Of Culture.

"Every time I meet a fan, the first thing they tell me is the things that I haven't accomplished. And I love it, because I be like, 'You're right. I'm trying to get that too, man.'"

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PHOTOGRAPH BY **Isaac Campbell**

DINO JAMES: SCALING NEW HEIGHTS IN HIP-HOP

THE MUMBAI RAPPER HAS BEEN ONE OF INDIAN HIP-HOP'S FULL-THROATED VOICES EVER SINCE STEPPING ONTO THE SCENE

By **David Britto**

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Jacket: **L'avenir Skin**

Jewellery Courtesy: **Drip Project**

HMU: **Swapnil Haldankar**

Reflecting on his journey thus far, Bhopal-raised, Mumbai rapper Dino James acknowledges the rollercoaster ride that comes with pursuing a career in hip-hop. Having experienced the many ups and downs that come with being an artist, James counts these moments as ones that have shaped him as an artist. He says, "I feel incredibly fortunate and blessed." In 2023, James ventures beyond music into the television world while keeping his focus on his upcoming album and singles that are in the pipeline. Nearly seven years after his vulnerable breakout hit "Loser" in 2016, it is evident that James' journey is far from stagnant, with each new endeavor propelling him forward.

In 2022, James released his full-length debut album *D*, which displayed a variety of soundscapes and lyrical themes. The album serves as a genuine representation of who he is as an artist. "[The songs on D] showcase the diverse range I possess as a rapper, music director, and songwriter," says James.

With James now on his way to achieving further success and cementing his position as one of the top rappers in India, we caught up with him to discuss what he has in store next, what success means to him and more. Read below:

Last year you released your full-length debut album *D* – the record covers a number of soundscapes and lyrical themes – what can you tell us about the story of this record, and do you think this album is the truest representation of yourself?

This album is a genuine reflection of who I am as an artist. Initially, my intention was to create visuals for each of my songs. However, I've come to realize that it's important to compile these songs and showcase the diverse range I possess as a rapper, music director, and songwriter. This album serves as a unique opportunity for me to express my art, hoping that people will connect and resonate with it on a deeper level.

YouTube played a big role in terms of you getting noticed – what do you think about the platform as an artist?

During the era when I started my journey with music, the ecosystem wasn't as developed as it is today. There was a lot of uncertainty and insecurity, especially within the hip-hop industry. Nevertheless, I was driven by the passion to create and follow my heart. YouTube became my sanctuary, the one platform where I had complete ownership and the freedom to express myself exactly as I desired. I am forever grateful to this platform because it allowed me not only to present my music but also visually showcase my art, enabling me to reach and connect with people in a profound way.

In your songwriting there's a lot of storytelling involved too, is that something that you always set out to do when creating a song?

I draw inspiration from my Guru, particularly artists like Eminem, Kendrick Lamar, Dr. Dre, and many others who prioritize their craft of writing, which resonates deeply with people. When I first discovered hip-hop, it wasn't about the flashy gold chains or fancy cars; it was about finding a voice, a platform to speak out and express opinions through music. That's precisely the essence I infuse into my songs—expressiveness and emotional depth. Whether it's through tracks like "Girlfriend," "Loser," "Yaadein," or "Hancock," I strive to pour my heart and soul into every lyric, allowing my emotions and feelings to intertwine with the music. It's about creating a genuine connection with listeners through my art.

Your music is relatable to most no matter one's background – which is quite unique. How do you feel about that, that your songs are able to reach a wide audience?

I consider myself incredibly fortunate to have the opportunity to reach a broader audience with my music, but that was never the primary objective when I initially created and shared my songs. There's a saying that goes, "The most personal feeling is often the most universal," and that resonates with me deeply. Through my songs,

I'm simply expressing myself and sharing my thoughts and emotions. I don't know how my songs will be received or interpreted, but I write what I feel and think in the present moment. Back then, I was in a state of writing and sharing my songs, and to my surprise, people embraced them and showed their support. I am sincerely grateful to my audience for allowing me to voice my thoughts and beliefs, and for believing in me.

What does success mean to you? What are the biggest traits of successful artists?
To me, success means being able to provide for my family, having the freedom to live happily, eat well, stay fit, and express myself exactly as I want. It's about feeling like a free bird, pursuing my passions with the support and resources I need. It's about bringing my A-game and ensuring the well-being of my loved ones. In essence, success is a simple yet fulfilling life, where I can take care of my family and enjoy the things that truly matter.

"My goal is to reach new heights and bring my ideas to life using the gifts that God has given me."

What did it mean to you to be signed to Def Jam India last year?
Def Jam has been home to the legends in hip-hop – Jay Z, Kanye West, Snoop Dogg and many others. Being the first artist from India to be a part of the same home was an achievement for me. It meant that my hard work and talent were recognized. Collaborating with them on my album gave me valuable opportunities to grow as an artist and reach a wider audience. It was a transformative experience that elevated my music career and solidified my presence in the industry.

Ever since you've been involved with music, what are some moments that stand out for you?
There have been numerous standout moments throughout my music journey that hold a special place in my heart. The recognition my songs were getting, [it] felt good to see my hard work come to fruition and the joy of connecting with listeners is exhilarating. Collaborating with incredibly talented artists and musicians has been a source of inspiration and growth for me, pushing me to explore new creative horizons. Additionally, being recognized and receiving support and love for my work has been incredibly humbling and served as a validation of my artistic endeavors. Each of these moments has contributed to my artistic journey, motivating me to continue pursuing my dream.

Every moment in the music process holds its own special magic. From the initial creation of a song, there are lines that make you feel like you've tapped into something divine. In the studio, there are exhilarating moments when you listen to your own songs after they've been mixed and mastered to perfection. The beauty of the music journey lies in the countless unforgettable moments that seem never-ending.

Which artists are you currently listening to at the moment?
Lately, I've been enjoying a lot of music from South African artists like Black Coffee, while also keeping my favorite artists like Eminem and J Cole on repeat. Additionally, I've been exploring the diverse music scene in the UK. It's a mix of different sounds that keeps my playlist fresh and exciting.

What releases are you working on?
There is a lot in the pipeline and I want to make sure it goes well. Very exciting releases lined up!

Who has been a collaborator of yours from whom you have learned a lot?
I have been fortunate to collaborate with several talented individuals throughout my artistic journey, and each collaboration has taught me valuable lessons, hard to name one. These collaborations go beyond music – filmmaker Himanshu Tyagi who has directed all of my music videos, Bluish who is a music producer, Mikhael a cinematographer and DOP and my team at Shark & Ink

Their insights and guidance have helped me refine my craft, explore new artistic territories, and grow as an artist. It's through collaborations like these that I have been able to expand my horizons and continually evolve as a musician and performer. I am grateful for the opportunities to learn from talented collaborators and for the mutual exchange of knowledge and inspiration that takes place in these creative partnerships.

What are the most challenging goals for you musically?
My goal is to reach new heights and bring my ideas to life using the gifts that God has given me. I don't see it as a competition with others; instead, I challenge myself to see how far I can go with my music, visuals, creativity, and business ventures. Money has never been my main focus; rather, it's about creating and satisfying myself as a creator while receiving love and support from my fans and loved ones. My ultimate joy comes from sharing my art and being appreciated by those who resonate with it.

Your advice to people starting out in the industry
Be real, don't try to copy anybody. Just be yourself and believe in yourself. People will see your art and they will resonate with you. ®

BY JULYSSA LOPEZ
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STYLING BY NICOLA FORMICHETTI
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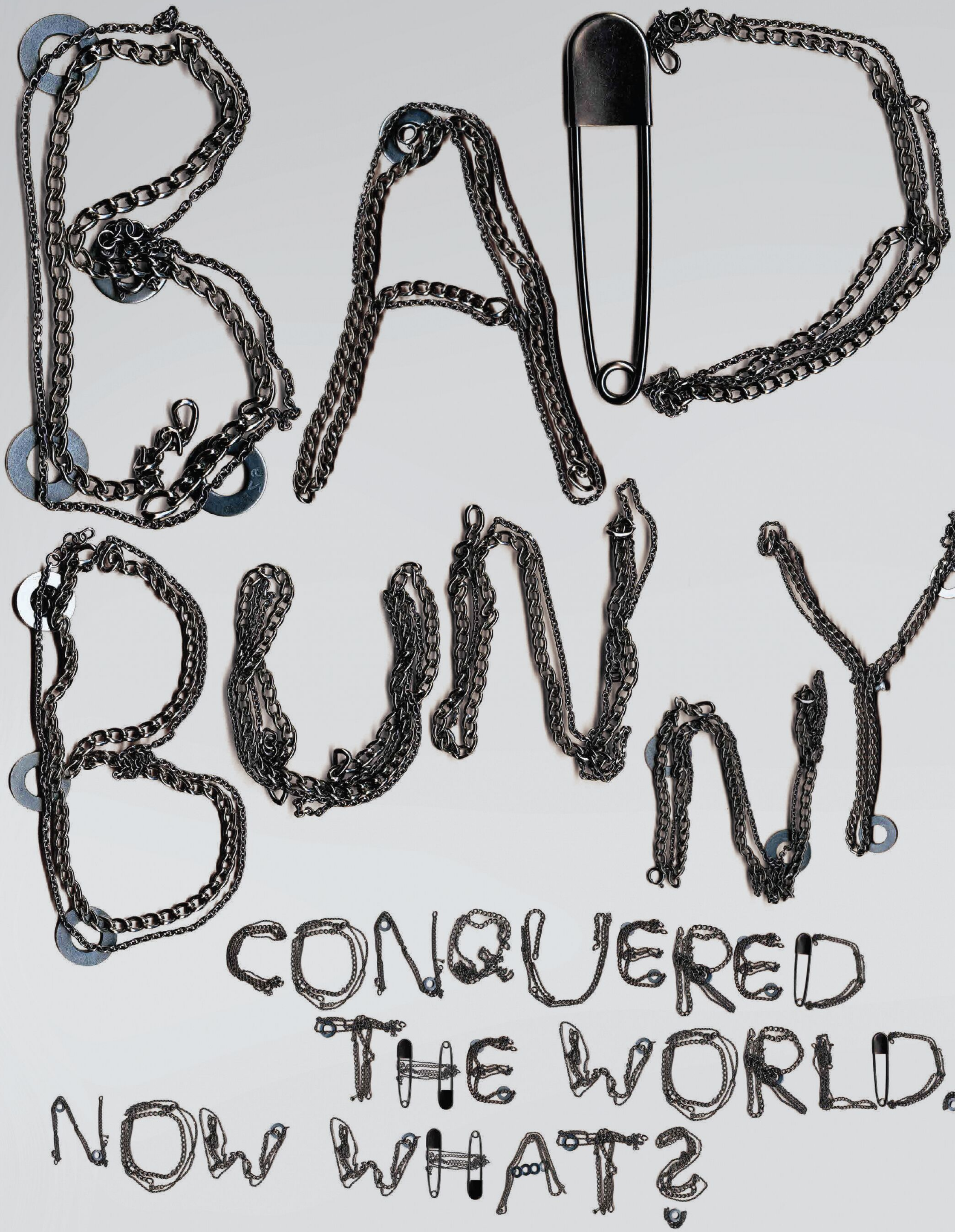
BRAND
BUNNY
CONQUERED
THE WORLD.
NOW WHAT?

Backstage, minutes before Bad Bunny's headlining set at Coachella, everyone seems to be running on pure adrenaline. A group of dancers are climbing a set of stairs toward their marks when a security guard stops a wardrobe designer in their midst and refuses to let him pass. "He's the designer!" one woman shrieks, her voice crackling with the anxiety of countless things that could go wrong.

A gate flings open, and Kylie and Kendall Jenner pass through the backstage area, leaving me so surprised that I wheel around and almost hit Kylie with my backpack. Nearby, a troop of fans break into sprints, trying to get into a private area just in front of the stage that's rapidly filling up with celebrities from all over the world. Eventually, the Jenners; Blackpink's Jennie, Rosé, and Jisoo; Mexican singer Peso Pluma; and Hailey and Justin Bieber all stand there to watch Bad Bunny make history in real time.

The crowd radiates a chaotic, uncontainable energy, understanding that there will be a precise before and after this moment. Bad Bunny is about to become the first Latino solo act and first Spanish-language artist to headline Coachella in the festival's 30-year history.

Screens flicker. As the audience roars a few decibels louder in anticipation, Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio is standing onstage in the dark, a mantra running through his head: *Thank you, God, thank you, life, for letting me do this.* It's one of the only private moments he lets himself have during the performance — if he gets sidetracked by any thought, he tends to forget his lyrics, and this event is too big for distractions.

Martínez dives into his set, blasting through hits from *Un Verano Sin Ti,* his world-conquering album from last year. He packs in detailed video tributes to salsa and reggaeton, recounting the music's history and honoring artists from previous generations. "There were a lot of people way before me who did huge things," he tells me later. "Sometimes people forget or, who knows, maybe gringos weren't paying as much attention. But now that the focus is on us, I wanted to make it clear there's been a long road before me." Partway through his set, he brings out reggaeton pioneers Jowell Y Randy and Ñengo Flow for "Safaera," the voltaic, constantly morphing *perreo* mini mix, made up of old-school beat flips and samples that capture the spirit of Puerto Rico's *marquesina* parties.

And then comes an unexpected hurdle. Martínez wanted to surprise the audience with a special guest — someone he'd never collaborated with, someone no one would ever guess. In the final weeks of rehearsals, he made a call to Post Malone, who was down to help out, even though the two had never met in person. Malone pops up partway through the show and joins Martínez for acoustic versions of "Yonaguni" and "La Canción." Unfortunately, as Malone begins strumming, the mic on his guitar cuts out, and the two of them stand there, fumbling with a cord for a few excruciating minutes. "I was worried about him," Martínez says later. "When I saw his face, it was like, 'This can't be happening.' So that's when I took the lead and was like, 'Don't worry, don't worry.'" Martínez gets the crowd to sing along so he can finish the tracks a cappella, even as Malone keeps plucking away on a silent guitar. "The most important reaction to have was not to lose my head," Martínez recalls. He eventually peels off on a jet ski, part of the elaborate stage design, and sings a few tracks with Jhayco while Malone stays right there, dancing and vibing out until the show is over.

In the end, the two-hour set was unprecedented and imperfect, historic and human. As soon as it was over, Martínez hopped in a car and headed back to the house in Palm Springs he rented during the festival. He took a shower. He ate a bowl of cereal. And within 15 minutes, he fell fast asleep. "I laid down and went to bed, *tranquilito, tranquilito.*" Calmly, calmly, just another day in the life of a global megastar.

Do you think Bad Bunny took time off after Coachella? Of course he didn't. Five days after the performance, he's trekking out to Lucerne Valley — the dry, cracked terrain that's served as a backdrop for Westerns like *Stagecoach* and horror films like *The Hills Have Eyes* — to shoot the video for his newest song, "Where She Goes." The moody, lovelorn track tells the story of a one-night stand over a breakneck Jersey-club beat. The title is meant to be a tease: "I like to make people wonder and make them think I'm releasing a song in English because people are *jodiendo*, like *atatatata,*" he says, mimicking the nonstop chatter he's been hearing on social media. He wrote it in Los Angeles sometime around February, after revisiting a track his producer MAG sent him. There's speculation online that it's about his rumored relationship with Kendall Jenner, but when I ask what inspired it, he only says, "*cosas de la vida*" — "things in life."

"It's funny and also frustrating that people think they know about the lives of celebrities. They think they know the story of your life, your interior thoughts, your romantic life. In reality, they don't know at all."

Before the shoot, a text went out to the crew, urging everyone to wear face masks because of intense desert winds. Stillz, Martínez's frequent director, helped come up with the video concept, which involves Martínez speeding through the desert in a vintage Rolls-Royce as a series of visions — a woman with angel wings, wild horses kicking up dust — flash by.

Martínez rolls up to the set and bounces directly into his trailer to get ready for the first shot. As he changes in the back, a few guys from his team — including his manager Noah Assad and creative consultant Janthony Oliveras — are hanging around a small kitchen, watching Los Cangrejeros de Santurce, a Puerto Rican basketball team Martínez and Assad co-own, play Los Vaqueros de Bayamón. By the time Martínez emerges in navy-blue pants and a studded jacket, a heated discussion about soda has erupted: One side of the room argues that it's always better in a can, the other defends the merits of fountain drinks. Martínez steps in, settling the debate: "A can. There's no comparison," he says. "The only thing that can stand up to it — because of the nostalgia factor — is a fountain drink you get at the movies."

It feels like he's talking about a remnant of his old life, when he was a college kid bagging groceries at a supermarket and making beats in his room — worlds away from where he's at now. Over the past year, he's reached a new stratosphere of stardom: *Un Verano Sin Ti* became the biggest album in the world in 2022, according to the IFPI (and the most-streamed in the U.S.), beating out Beyoncé and Taylor Swift while making history as the first Spanish-language LP to receive a Grammy nomination for Album of the Year. He had a memorable cameo in *Bullet Train* alongside Brad Pitt. He was Spotify's most-streamed artist for the third year in a row and broke the world record for the highest-grossing tour in a calendar year. He's done all of this fearlessly and without compromise: He's refused to make concessions to the Anglo market, challenged gender norms with his sense of style, and lifted up Puerto Rican and other Latino communities in the process. His music is unabashedly political but also stylistically unpredictable, delivered in a one-of-a-kind baritone that's made him the people's icon.

All of it has culminated in a level of fame that means he's virtually everywhere — even at Walmart, where, just the other day, one of his team members found an entire unauthorized Bad Bunny magazine. There's a copy of it sitting in front of me, so I flip through it and find a quiz inside called the Rabbit Test. I hand it to him and joke that he should take it. Some stuff, like what profession his mom and dad had in Puerto Rico (a teacher and a truck driver), is easy. But he can't remember which of his songs first cracked the Hot 100 (kind of a trick question — it was Becky G's 2017 hit "Mayores," which he's featured on) and whose tour record he broke in 2022 (Ed Sheeran). In the end, not even Martínez gets a perfect Rabbit score.

In fairness, his whirlwind career is hard to keep up with. In early 2022, he made his way through North American arenas for El Último Tour Del Mundo. Just weeks after his final show, he dropped *Un Verano Sin Ti* and launched the World's Hottest Tour, which took him to some of the biggest stadiums across the globe. He spent the next few months making headlines for bringing out surprise guests like Romeo Santos and Cardi B, and for selling out show after show.

His first 2023 performance was a Grammy-opening salvo that honored his Caribbean roots; a screenshot of the broadcast's closed captioning describing him as "singing in non-English" went viral. But — and this is where the global ubiquity thing gets complicated — other moments this year went viral, too: an infamous video of him chucking a fan's phone after she shoved into him for a selfie, paparazzi shots of him with Jenner, fans getting frustrated with his quotes about colorism and his song "El Apagon" (more on all of that in a moment). In between, there were lawsuits, including one filed by an ex-girlfriend alleging unauthorized use of her voice on two songs, and a whole lot of opinions online.

In person, Martínez is taller than I imagined, but he looks younger than 29. Though he's been training for an upcoming appearance at WWE's Backlash event, he's more lanky than he is bulky,

PRODUCTION BY HOUND CONTENT. PRODUCED BY DIONNE COCHRANE, MISSY GALANIDA, AND ANDREA SAAVEDRA. PHOTOGRAPHY DIRECTION BY EMMA REEVES. HAIR BY NIKKI NELMS. MAKEUP BY KEITA MOORE. SET DESIGN BY GRIFFIN STODDARD. SET DRESSERS: ARLINGTON GARRETT AND RICKY TORRES. CARPENTER: ALEC GENNA. ART COORDINATOR: GRACE BECK. SET AIRBRUSH ARTIST: PATRICK QUINN. PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANCE: BYRON NICKELBERRY AND ELIANEL CLINTON. DIGITAL TECHNICIAN: TARA CHUMPELIK. STYLING ASSISTANCE: BRIANNA DOOLEY, RICARDO MCLEOD, AND MELINDA VELOVIC. HAIR ASSISTANCE: IKEYIA POWELL. MAKEUP ASSISTANCE: NICOLE BUENO. PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE: BRITTANY THOMPSON. PHOTOGRAPHED AT PIER59 STUDIOS.

GUCCI MOTO JACKET + PANT
CAMPERLAB VENGA CLOGS
GENTLE MONSTER PASO BL3 SUNGLASSES
AUSTIN JAMES SMITH SPIKE EARRING
SECRET OF MANNA PUSH-PIN EARRING
AUSTIN JAMES SMITH SPIRAL FIRE RING
TOM WOOD STERLING-SILVER STACKED RING
APT. 1007 NECKLACES

his legs stretched out under a small table in the trailer. His enormous brown eyes stay steady and fixed as he delivers his thoughts. When he gets riled up, he speaks in quick, animated bursts, especially as he's outlining the complexities of a wild 2023.

He doesn't mind the work; he calls his time on tour intense but also wonderful, a chance to connect with fans. Still, at the end of 2022, he'd been envisioning a time when he'd get to turn inward and focus on himself for a bit. "That's what I've been trying to do without caring about the obstacles, because it's … *cabron,*" he says, employing a word that in this context can only be translated as "fucking hard." He trails off for a second. "I love the world, but I also hate the world," he declares finally. I look at him surprised, but he's laughing, a slightly mischievous glint in his eye. "That should be the cover: 'I love the world but sometimes I hate it.'"

There's a kind of levity to how he says it. He's finding the humor in all of this, smiling slyly and refusing to take things too seriously. But he's also being honest: "Check this," he continues. "Before 2022 was over, I said in an interview, '2023 is going to be for me, to rest, to work on my physical health, on my mental health, to have my space, to enjoy, to be happy.' And then 2023 starts with *cabroneria.*"

How to translate that one? Silliness? Fuckery? He's talking specifically about the social media uproar that followed the cellphone thing, the grim irony of wishing for a quiet year and getting chaos. But he also refuses to let that kind of thing get in his way. "At the end of the day, I don't care what people think," he says. This is, after all, the guy who has made an entire brand out of doing exactly what he wants — and his current goal is to keep doing that, even through the demands of hyper-stardom and a career that keeps expanding at warp speed.

A few minutes later, he heads out into the desert to shoot. He knew the sandstorms were coming, but didn't anticipate how strong they'd be. He returns to the trailer, wind-whipped and flushed, rubbing together red, chapped hands, but then he's on his way again. Before I head home, I make out his figure in the distance, standing there battling the elements.

In January, Martínez vacationed in the Dominican Republic. He was walking down a street with friends when fans started rushing over to say hi. "People were recording," he says. "I love going to D.R., so I was waving to everyone, like, *'Que lo que!'*" Suddenly, a woman jumped in front of him for a selfie. "That person got right on me, leaned directly on my body," he says. His immediate instinct was to toss the phone.

Did he feel bad about it? "The next day! The next day, the next day," he says, throwing his hands in the air. But he felt his personal space had been invaded, and he adds that he didn't toss it into the ocean, as some outlets reported. "Bro, that cellphone didn't break. It exists. It bothers me that people haven't said that. I didn't throw that phone into the water. I threw it into some bushes." He claims the woman picked it up right where it landed. "She has it. She should upload the video," he says, chuckling dryly.

Arguments about his behavior raged online; some defended him, while others — including a few reggaeton artists — thought lobbing a fan's personal property went too far. Martínez locked down his social media and retreated to a mansion he reportedly bought for $8.8 million in the Hollywood Hills.

After announcing he would be part of the Backlash wrestling event, which was held in Puerto Rico in May, he started working with a WWE trainer. He caught up on TV shows and movies: He's been rewatching *Game of Thrones* because Oliveras has never seen it, and he's worked through Apple TV+'s *Shrinking,* starring Jason Siegel as a grieving therapist who takes an active role in his patients' lives.

Martínez has also gotten into vinyl from the Seventies, a period he says has been inspiring his music. He was browsing a record store in Santa Monica when he found an album by the Puerto Rican artist José Feliciano, sending him down a rabbit hole into the singer-songwriter's 60-year career. Yes, there's the Christmas classic "Feliz Navidad," but there are also 19 Grammy nominations, 56 albums, and his stripped-down, folksy take on "The Star-Spangled Banner" in 1968 that was met with such outrage that racists began calling for Feliciano to be deported, even though Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens.

"It struck me that I think a lot of younger people don't know how big he was," Martínez explains. "People are like, 'Oh, Bad Bunny is breaking ground with gringos!' No, papi — José Feliciano was breaking ground with gringos since the Seventies, you hear me? He was doing worldwide tours, he was in London, singing in English, singing to Anglophone audiences."

In some ways, Feliciano's story reflects an ahistorical view of Latin music perpetuated by Anglo media: the idea that Latin artists exist in boom cycles, only relevant when they're deemed popular by Anglo audiences. Latin music *is* growing rapidly — last year it generated more than $1 billion in revenue in the U.S. alone, a 23.8 percent increase from the previous year (a lot of that was driven by Martínez). But focusing on sales numbers and commercial viability can flatten decades of art and erase towering Latin figures who've been an integral part of American musical history.

This kind of narrative was something that Martínez wanted to reverse at Coachella. One way to do that, he thought, was to invite Feliciano onstage with him. During the festival's second weekend, the 77-year-old artist stepped in for an emotional moment, playing the acoustic portion Post Malone had a week before. (Feliciano had better luck with the mics.)

Martínez also included those tribute videos — an entire history lesson folded into the show, paying homage to Cuban salsa legends like Celia Cruz and La Lupe, and reggaeton titans like Tego Calderón and Daddy Yankee, while tracing the Black roots of these genres and the influences across the Caribbean that have shaped them. The approach was similar to another one of Martínez's interventions on a gate-kept world stage: the Grammys, where, in February, he put distinctly Puerto Rican musical traditions like bomba and plena on display. He ended his show with *cabezudos* — giant character heads used in festivals and processionals — representing

GUCCI JUMPER
CAMPERLAB EKI BOOTS
OTTOLINGER TWISTED SUNGLASSES
MARTINE ALI EARRINGS
PRISTINE JEWELERS CUSTOM DIAMOND RING

BUT I ALSO HATE THE WORLD. THAT SHOULD BE THE COVER: I LOVE THE WORLD BUT SOMETIMES I HATE IT.

REGGAETON'S CROWN JEWELS

Bad Bunny always represents where he comes from and the artists who inspired him. For his *Rolling Stone* cover story, he wanted to honor the reggaeton heroes he looked up to as a kid by wearing jewel-encrusted medallion necklaces with their logos on them. Designed by Avi Davidov and Ofir Ben-Shimon, the medallions represent the decades-long careers of Puerto Rican luminaries Tego Calderón, Héctor El Father, Wisin Y Yandel, Arcángel, Don Omar, and Daddy Yankee. Bad Bunny had been toying with the idea for a long time, thinking he would wear the necklaces to pay homage to the reggaeton greats at a major concert or public appearance. "When the opportunity to shoot with *Rolling Stone* came along, I was like, 'Damn, that would be perfect.' "

He sees himself as part of the lineage of these artists and carrying on their legacy. "That's my foundation," he says. "I've taken something from all these artists I've listened to and loved."

beloved icons from the island, like baseball legend Roberto Clemente, singer and composer Ismael Rivera, and others.

Martínez's gestures often culminate in more direct action, too, like when he cut his 2019 tour in Europe short to join Puerto Rico's protests against then-Gov. Ricardo Rosselló. Last July, he blasted LUMA Energy — the private company that's mismanaged Puerto Rico's power grid — and current Gov. Pedro Pierluisi at a show in San Juan: "Pierluisi and all the dick suckers who run Puerto Rico, fuck off." "He represents different things at different moments, but I think he always represents Puerto Rico," says Vanessa Díaz, a professor at Loyola Marymount University who teaches a class called "Bad Bunny and Resistance in Puerto Rico." "I think that he always represents a Puerto Rican spirit of resistance and struggle and the complexity of life there."

Since he started making music, Martínez has sought to capture the depth of Puerto Rican identity and Caribbean traditions. That might be why it was jarring for some fans when he appeared on the cover of *Time* in March and discussed "El Apagon," arguably his most political song since the protests. The title means "The Blackout," a reference to the power outages that have plagued Puerto Rico since Hurricane Maria, and it celebrates the beauty of the island while calling out gentrification and displacement there. Speaking to *Time,* Martínez shared that he wrote the song's line "*Ahora todos quieren ser Latino, pero les falta sazon*" ("Now everyone wants to be Latino, but they're missing flavor") after feeling frustrated with the way certain artists seemed to embrace Latino identity only when it was convenient. But, he added, "Now that feeling has passed me. It's not like I feel like that right now."

The quotes ricocheted across social media, where they were translated, mangled, and misinterpreted as Martínez saying he regretted making "El Apagon." A backlash erupted, one that roughly coincided with paparazzi releasing photos of Martínez and Jenner hanging out. Everyone, it seemed, suddenly had an opinion about Martínez. "Sadly, Bad Bunny has been consumed by the gringo market.… How does he regret writing one of the most iconic lines in 'El Apagon?'" one person wrote on Twitter. Another went viral with a virulent TikTok speech calling Martínez's outings with Jenner an example of "the power of a fully colonized mind."

Martínez seemed to address the furor in an impromptu speech at Coachella: "You won't get to know the real me through a video on Instagram, an interview, or a TikTok. If you really want to get to know me, I invite you to my home."

When I ask him to clarify what that speech meant, he's quiet for a second. "It's a delicate issue," he says, finally. "That interview was taken out of context, so I'd hate for the same thing to happen with this one. But I'll try to explain it: What I said was, like, people are funny — it's funny and also frustrating to see how people really think they know about the lives of celebrities, of what they think, of what they do day to day. They think they know the story of your life, your interior thoughts, your romantic life, but, in reality, they don't know at all.…

"When I saw [people saying] that I had regretted writing 'El Apagon,' it shocked me, like when did I ever say that in the interview? I would never say that in my fucking life," he continues. It frustrated him because of what the song meant. "It was a whole journey, like the process that began with something patriotic, and then the party and the messing around, and later the

sentimental part, the conscience in it. I always say that's the life of people in Puerto Rico: We're proud of being Puerto Rican, we love to celebrate and act like nothing matters, and then we clash against a reality that is often very painful." (I ask him who the infamous "*Ahora todos quieren ser Latino*" line was about. "Obviously, I'm not going to tell you," he says, laughing lightly. But he does share that his initial frustration was aimed at two women in particular.)

The place in the Hollywood Hills marks Martínez's first time living outside of Puerto Rico. "He's an introvert," Assad tells me later. "I don't want to use the word 'low-key' because that sounds cliché, but he really is." Most of his inner circle has been around for years; he and Oliveras went to the same high school, and he's known his photographer and assistant Jomar Dávila since he was around 11. "To this day, he's with his eight best friends, and they're working," Assad says. "They're not his entourage, they're his family."

Living in California has let Martínez "experiment with new routines, new places, meeting new people," as he puts it. L.A. also allows him to move around a little more easily; in Puerto Rico, he tends to cause a scene when he goes out. "I like to go eat at a restaurant calmly, go see a movie, relax, go for a walk," he says of L.A. But eventually, he'll go back. "Puerto Rico's my home," he says. "I don't see myself getting old anywhere other than Puerto Rico."

For the time being, though, he's been leaning into his Hollywood era — attending Beyoncé and Jay-Z's Oscar afterparty, greeting the Weeknd at Coachella. When I tell him it seems like he's been expanding his circle of friends in Los Angeles, he's quiet for a second. "Yeah, I think so. I've been a little complicated when it comes to getting to know people my whole life. At school, I was always really close to my friends, and I was friendly, but also closed off. During this time, I've been trying to socialize more, get to know more people."

Even though his outings with some of those friends — Jenner in particular — have become splashy tabloid fodder, there's a lot he wants to hold for himself. He's protective about his personal life: "I know something is going to come out. I know [people are] going to say something. People know everything about me, so what's left for me to protect? My private life, my personal life." Later, I ask him if he wants to clear up anything about his relationship status and the tabloid rumors with Jenner, and he offers the same refrain: "That's the only answer. In the end, the only thing I have is my privacy."

What's it been like to have people so invested in his personal life? "I keep living," he says. "Fans are always going to want to know more, but I don't focus on that. I'm always going to keep living my way."

About a week after the desert video shoot, Martínez is at New York's Mark Hotel, meeting with the French designer Simon Porte Jacquemus ahead of the Met Gala. The room is serene — Oliveras puts on a playlist of low-fi bands I've never heard of — and Martínez stands in front of the mirror quietly, wearing a pristine white suit with 26 feet of floral fabric trailing behind (Oliveras says the look was inspired by photos of Karl Lagerfeld with his cat, Choupette). Martínez tries on two sets of pants before deciding on a slimmer cut Jacquemus had designed, then turns to reveal a backless blazer, adorned with a silver body chain featuring a "J" charm dangling down his spine.

Martínez's second appearance at the Met Gala is far less nerve-wracking than his first. "Last year, I felt like I was the new kid in school," he says when we get back into the car and head to the nearby hotel where he's staying. "I think this year I'm going to feel a lot more comfortable." Plus, he enjoys the process of getting ready: "I like dressing pretty."

His Met Gala outfit reflects the gender-fluid style he's known for. He's worn nail polish and bright-pink minidresses over the years, and in 2020, he was fully in drag for his "Yo Perreo Sola" video. His consciousness-raising goes beyond style, too: He's spoken out about transfemicides and gender violence in Puerto Rico, and last summer, he made headlines for kissing a male dancer onstage during his VMAs performance. GLAAD gave him its 2023 Vanguard Award, which Ricky Martin presented to him while applauding him for encouraging LGBTQ communities to "dance, sing, love, and live lives authentically."

Back in his hotel room, Martínez walks to a turntable and cues up Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours.* I ask him what else he's been listening to, and he

"When I saw [people saying] I regretted writing 'El Apagon,' it shocked me," he says, referring to the ode to Puerto Rico he released last year. "I would never say that in my fucking life."

flips through his phone, reading some of his playlists out loud. "I've been listening to Luis Miguel a lot," he says, referring to the famous mariachi and bolero balladeer. He lists off a few more Mexican acts that have been blowing up lately: Grupo Frontera, Peso Pluma, Eslabon Armado. There's a range of genres, too: "Radiohead," he says, name-checking albums like *OK Computer* and *In Rainbows.* "Phob …" He trips over the name slightly. "Phoebe Bridgers?"

"Whether I'm at home or with the guys, we listen to everything: reggaeton, trap, bachata, salsa, música Mexicana, banda, regional, corridos tumbados," he says. He sees a newer generation of artists as constant motivators: "I see them tearing it up, and it makes me want to tear it up even harder."

Some of those newer artists include the guys from Grupo Frontera, who Martínez brought onstage the second week of Coachella to play "un x100to," a song they'd collaborated on. Martínez helped curate *Rolling Stone*'s Future 25, our list featuring our favorite artists on the rise, suggesting everyone from the innovative singer-songwriter-violinist Sudan Archives to Puerto Rican acts like trap dynamo Young Miko, trailblazing rapper Villano Antillano, and urbano singer Omar Courtz. He also shouts out Peso Pluma, the breakthrough música Mexicana sensation. Martinez says that when they met for the first time at Coachella, Peso Pluma immediately apologized for a moment at a recent concert, when he shouted that "Ella Baila Sola," a song he made with the band Eslabon Armado, had surpassed "*el pendejo de* Bad Bunny" ("the asshole Bad Bunny") to reach Number One on Spotify.

"I was like 'You don't need to say sorry,'" Martínez says, laughing. "I said, 'I remember when I was young, in your position, and would get excited.'"

Martínez is still young, but he's become an outsize figure to other artists, fans, and even academics. As we talk, there's a two-day symposium coming up called "Thinking with Bad Bunny: Cultural Politics and the Future of Puerto Rico," organized by the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College, with help from Díaz and Wellesley professor Petra Rivera-Rideau. The idea that there's an entire university event dedicated to his career is a little shocking for him. "I'm like, 'What in the world?' I would have liked to take that class in college to get an A," he jokes.

He's flattered — but he tries not to get caught up in all the recognition. "I have in the back of my mind that I want to do big things and make a difference, but I do it for myself," he says. "I don't do it hoping that at some point, they'll offer classes about me at universities. I don't think anyone thinks that way." He lowers his voice, mimicking what he imagines a pretentious musician to sound like: "One day, I want them to study my work."

Surely, being a global superstar comes with some pressure? Martínez rejects the question. "If I ever feel pressure, it's because it's coming from me. If I want to do something better, it's because of me. I don't let myself give into pressure from other people, I don't feel pressure to be the best. Never, ever, ever. I do this because I love it."

Yet Martínez's entire career has positioned him as the most visible Latino in music right now; because of that, the expectations and responsibilities fans place on him only seem to multiply, particularly when it comes to speaking up about political and social issues. "I think that's where I clash with people," he says. "Everyone sees life how they want, and everyone can think what they want. I don't have an obligation to anyone — the *slightest* obligation to anyone.… I have what I think here," he says, pointing to his temple. "I can say it to my friends, I can vent to my mom, I can vent talking to myself, but I don't need to share that with the public. I'm not a superhero. I'm an artist who's here to make music because I love making music."

He sees a lot of artists who make corporate-feeling statements that ring false. "They'll put up a message that their publicist wrote on social media, and people will applaud it just because they did it to check off a box," he says. He knows that in some ways, his music and his example have been more effective than any statement he could make.

"I'm not very good at standing in front of people and saying a speech," he says. "Any time I have to accept an award and say something, it's, like, the worst time in my life as an artist.… But I think that's exactly the specific reason that I'm an artist. The way I feel most comfortable saying something is through a song or a video. People who have a talent for talking or speaking for something in society should do it. I feel I did that part with my song."

But more complex conversations might require more of Martínez, given his position in the industry. One involves colorism and racism in

Latin music, forces that mean a white-skinned artist like Martínez can become a superstar while Black Latinos remain largely absent from the highest levels of the music scene. In his Time interview, he was asked whether elements of race and colorism played a role in who succeeds in reggaeton. "Because I haven't seen it or lived it," he was quoted as saying. "I can't say. It'd be irresponsible of me to say yes."

To many, that answer felt dismissive, as if he couldn't be bothered to notice. When I bring it up, Martínez claims it's another comment taken out of context. (In his full answer, published in a separate article by the magazine, the quote is part of a longer answer about how his views on the topic had evolved.) To me, he says he didn't want to speak over the experiences of people who have suffered racism. "I'm Latino, Caribbean, my skin is white," he explains. "I have felt rejection in the U.S., maybe in some places because of being Latino. I've felt rejected in a world where there's a lot of rich people and you could have 100 million in your bank account, and to them, you're [looked down on] for being Latino. I can't speak over the experiences of other artists. It's obvious that racism, colorism exists in all parts of the world, in all industries."

I catch up with Martínez again by phone in early June. He's in L.A., having just spent a few weeks traveling — first to Puerto Rico, then to Monaco, where he caught a Formula 1 race, then back to Puerto Rico to decompress. He hung out with his family. He cheered on Los Cangrejeros de Santurce, who'd been enjoying a winning streak. "I was just resting and living. I wasn't doing anything specific," he says, sounding like he finally got the time off he's been looking for.

Meanwhile, his career keeps blowing up. Just after "Where She Goes" came out, Martínez broke a Spotify record for the biggest streaming day for a male artist. The song was featured in his first Pepsi commercial, another celebrity milestone that puts him among the ranks of Britney Spears, Michael Jackson, and fellow Puerto Rican Chayanne, who did the first-ever Pepsi ad in Spanish in 1989. Fans are, again, divided online: Some balk at the idea of Bad Bunny teaming with a corporation for an ad; others are glad to see him represented in very visible marketing campaigns.

No one is sure what's coming next. Martínez does confirm that a collaboration with Travis Scott is on the horizon. "We worked on that a while back — and I think Travis has been working on his project for a minute," he says. Beyond that, he's trying to take a leisurely approach to music, recording things here and there if they feel right. "I don't know if maybe I'll release a song [this year] if I like it enough, but I don't think so. I said this year was for resting."

Who knows, though? Martínez has built a career out of unpredictable moves. He could stay quiet the rest of the year; he could release a full album. So much of his appeal is his ability to keep you guessing.

Further down the line, there's a future only he can see. He says he has years' worth of projects and material lined up in his head: "I spend so much time thinking about what I'm going to do next, thinking and creating, imagining things." People might be full of questions, eager to know where his career will take him. Martínez isn't one of them: "I already know where I'm going."

ONE OF HOLLYWOOD'S MOST BRILLIANT DIRECTORS SPENT THE PAST FEW YEARS IN ... BARBIELAND. GRETA GERWIG GOES VERY, VERY DEEP ON THE PINKEST MOVIE EVER MADE

THE BRAIN BEHIND Barbie

BY BRIAN HIATT
PHOTOGRAPH BY ELLEN FEDORS

WHEN GRETA GERWIG was in preproduction on her *Barbie* movie (out July 21), executives from the brand's owner, Mattel, paid her an inevitable visit. She gave them a preview of the movie's look (very, very pink) and feel (*Elf*-y magical-realism ramped up a thousandfold). Then she hit them with a monologue: stuff like the influence of spiritualist painters, how Barbie is like an ancient religious myth, references to *The Red Shoes* and "Stairway to Heaven" and *Heaven Can Wait*. "I think at that point, when I was in hour three of talking," Gerwig recalls with a small laugh, "they all realized no one has thought more about this. They saw I wake up every morning and panic about proportions and color saturation. And they were like, 'We don't have to panic. She's already panicked about this.' And I think that gave them a sense of comfort."

On a sunny late-May morning, Gerwig is sitting at a conference table in the rented Manhattan office suite where she's finishing postproduction, in one of the denim boiler suits she started wearing every day during the making of the movie (today's is black), her hair in a loose bun. It's 10:30, and she has a three-month-old baby at home (plus a four-year-old

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and a 13-year-old stepson), so she's just now getting to breakfast, which she takes down as she embarks on two more hours of erudite Barbie talk.

Well before *Barbie,* Gerwig had one of the most fascinating careers in 21st-century Hollywood. First, she brought a new kind of daffy comedic naturalism to screen acting, from early mumblecore triumphs like *Hannah Takes the Stairs* to a string of brilliant collaborations with her partner, Noah Baumbach, including *Greenberg, Frances Ha,* and *Mistress America.* She co-wrote the last two movies before shifting gears to auteurdom in 2017, writing and directing the exquisite coming-of-age comedy *Ladybird,* and 2019's revisionist take on *Little Women.*

Barbie, which stars Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling (and was co-written with Baumbach), is her biggest and most-mainstream project. But she insists it doesn't feel that way. "I've never been part of anything like this," she says. "But in a funny way, it feels like the fundamentals are the same. Even though it is Barbie and it is an internationally known brand, the movie feels very personal. It feels just as intimate as *Ladybird* or *Little Women.*"

I know you tend to resist autobiographical interpretations, but when Barbie says, "I don't wanna be an idea anymore," something about that really reminded me of your transition from a much-discussed actress to a writer-director.

You know what? It's so funny. That did not occur to me at all. But now that you say it, of course! When you're directing something, you have to be a bit stupid about yourself, or a little bit unconscious. And, yes, you're totally right. And also, I had no idea. But that's true. It's completely true.

There are things like I grew up in Sacramento, and *Ladybird* takes place in Sacramento. But so many of the things that are personal that come through your movies are never the things that are the most obvious to you. The things where you really feel unconsciously seen are things like that, where you realize, "Oh, man, I didn't hide anywhere." And that's always part of the joy of making art for people, is sometimes they understand it more than you do, which is unsettling.

Sorry!

No, but it's good.

How core to this whole project was the idea that Barbie would want to take a journey where she could become human?

I hope two things made that journey feel surprising but inevitable. I started from this idea of Barbieland, this place with no death, no aging, no decay, no pain, no shame. We know the story. We've heard this story. This is an old story. It's in a lot of religious literature. What happens to that person? They have to leave. And they have to confront all the things that were shielded from them in this place. So that felt like one thing.

And another thing felt like, well, it's Barbie, who's the queen of plastic! What better thing could we do than give her a real life? That would have to be the thing. Because it's the antithesis of something frozen. It's ever-changing and decaying and becoming beautiful in its falling apart. And that's the opposite of how we think of Barbie.

There's a lovely scene where Barbie sees an older woman — a sight she'd never encountered in Barbieland — and tells her she's beautiful.

I love that scene so much. And the older woman on the bench is the costume designer Ann Roth. She's a legend.

It's a cul-de-sac of a moment, in a way — it doesn't lead anywhere. And in early cuts, looking at the movie, it was suggested, "Well, you could cut it. And actually, the story would move on just the same." And I said, "If I cut the scene, I don't know what this movie is about."

Yeah, I kind of thought that was the moment Barbie decides she wants to be human.

That's how I saw it. To me, this is the heart of the movie. The way Margot plays that moment is so gentle and so unforced. There's the more outrageous elements in the movie that people say, "Oh, my God, I can't believe Mattel let you do this," or, "I can't believe Warner Bros. let you do this." But to me, the part that I can't believe that is still in the movie is this little cul-de-sac that doesn't lead anywhere — except for, it's the heart of the movie.

Margot said when she first saw the screenplay, she loved it, and was positive that the powers that be would never let you make it. How do you think you got it all through?

The movie in its conception and even from the script stage was always a wild ride. But I think that in the execution of it and the directing of it, it allowed me to go even farther, and to make it even more like a candy-colored explosion of things that people didn't necessarily think would be the *Barbie* movie. But, yeah, I can't account for it. But I'm thrilled to bits that they let me do it this way.

It's definitely a blast of color, which is refreshing after years and years of increasingly color-desaturated summer blockbusters.

I never wanted my adult taste to override what I loved as a kid. When I was eight years old, I loved the biggest, brightest, loudest, sparkliest thing that I could find. And I need to honor that even though I want the movie to be beautiful and delicious. I don't want it to be overwhelmed with adult good taste, because that just feels disingenuous to what the task is. So we were picking these bright, saturated colors. The result was that the set was like a dopamine generator. People would walk in and smile.

It's easy to underestimate what it took for Margot to manifest what we saw onscreen, especially when she's just being the Barbie-est Barbie she could possibly be. How did that performance evolve?

Margot and I talked a lot about finding this place where it's not that she isn't smart, but that she doesn't, at the beginning, have an interior life. Finding that sort of transparency as an actor was the baseline of where Barbie started. And then the discomfort of feeling disconnected from the environment, from feeling something coming up inside of you that's not the same as everyone else.

She's such a technical actor. But as Barbie becomes human, she allows the audience to see her experiencing something pure without performing. She's allowing herself to be vulnerable. And it's crazy because she's playing a doll, and yet it's such an exquisitely human performance. It's not something where you can stick the landing. It was something where she had to just allow it to happen. She's a person who can stick landings — and I think it was finding another gear inside of her.

Tell me about what it took to get Ryan Gosling as Ken, and to push him to be the most ridiculous version of Ryan Gosling imaginable.

Well, it was only ever Ryan Gosling, and it was a long journey. Margot and I just wouldn't take no for an answer.

From the moment that Margot came to me and I knew we were making this for Margot, I equally knew we were making this for Ryan. And I did not know Ryan at all. I'd never met him. I just was sure, and as soon as I thought of it, it made me so happy. Who else could do this? It's some combination of Marlon Brando meets Gene Wilder meets John Barrymore meets John Travolta.

He's never been quite this funny onscreen.

I've always thought of him as a secretly comedic actor. His comedy goes back to taking it incredibly seriously as an actor, where he never is doing it just for the laugh. And the way we talked about Ken was as in-depth character work as I've ever done with anyone about anything. When they were shooting their last scene together, in the bedroom where they're kind of coming to a place of understanding, and when he turns around and says, "There is no just Ken, it's Barbie and Ken," and he's exhausted and his face is stained with tears — I'm like, if what

"I MIGHT DIRECT MOVIES FOR A LONG TIME AND NEVER SEE ANYTHING THAT UNHINGED."

HAIR BY BOB RECINE AT THE WALL GROUP. HAIR ASSISTANCE BY SHINYA IWAMOTO. MAKEUP BY DANIEL MARTIN AT THE WALL GROUP. STYLING BY KATE YOUNG. STYLING ASSISTANCE BY SEAN NGUYEN AT THE WALL GROUP. DRESS BY KHAITE. JACKET BY LAFAYETTE 148. JEWELERY: GERWIG'S OWN.

Gerwig on set with Gosling, Simu Liu, and Robbie

actors do is perform empathetic acts for our benefit, I don't know that anyone has ever invested more in making people understand the plight of this man. It was extraordinary. I felt with both of them that I might direct movies for a long time and never see anything that uniquely and gloriously unhinged.

How did you craft the moment where Barbie finally learns that some women in the real world hate her and find her oppressive?

It felt like we had to give the counterargument to Barbie, and not give it short shrift, but give it real intellectual and emotional power. And Mattel was incredibly open to it. I said, "We have to explore it, because it's a lie any other way. And we can't make it a lie." I think they heard it.

The feminism in this film comes out so naturally, just by placing Barbie and Ken in the real world. It starts the moment they arrive in Venice Beach. Ken feels that people are suddenly looking at him with respect, and Barbie doesn't have the words for it, but she feels she's being objectified. Did that flow out as naturally as it seems?

I think of the film as humanist above anything else. How Barbie operates in Barbieland is she's entirely continuous with her environment. Even the houses have no walls, because you never need to hide because there's nothing to be ashamed of or embarrassed of. And suddenly finding yourself in the real world and wishing you could hide, that's the essence of being human. But when we were actually shooting on Venice Beach, with Margot and Ryan in neon rollerblading outfits, it was fascinating because it was actually happening in front of us. People would go by Ryan, high-five him, and say, "Awesome, Ryan, you look great!" And they wouldn't actually say anything to Margot. They'd just look at her. It was just surreal. In that moment, she did feel self-conscious. And as the director, I wanted to protect her. But I also knew that the scene we were shooting had to be the scene where she felt exposed. And she was exposed, both as a celebrity and as a lady. To be fair, Ryan was like, "I wish I wasn't wearing this vest." [*Laughs.*] But it was a different kind of discomfort.

When I hear you use the word "humanist," I feel like I need to gently push back on behalf of the fans who are going to love this movie and perceive its message as unabashedly feminist.

Of course, *I* am a feminist. But this movie is also dealing with [the idea that] any kind of hierarchical power structure that moves in any direction isn't so great. You go to Mattel and it is really like, "Oh, Barbie has been president since 1991. Barbie had gone to the moon before women could get credit cards." We kind of extrapolated out from that that Barbieland is this reversed world [where Barbies rule and Kens are an underclass]. The reverse structure of whatever Barbieland is, is almost like *Planet of the Apes*. You can see how unfair this is for the Kens because it's totally unsustainable.

Was the idea of Kate McKinnon's character — the Weird Barbie who's been played with too much — from your childhood experience?

We grew up in a neighborhood where there were a lot of girls older than me. So I had a lot of hand-me-down Barbies that had already gotten a haircut by the time I got them. It was like, "Well, we have to do that." It felt almost like a spiritual conduit to the world of play through that Barbie. Remember that book *The Giver*, by Lois Lowry, where the giver has all the colors and the feelings and stuff? That's sort of what I thought about Kate's character. She would be like the giver in a way like she had the knowledge that everyone else didn't have.

There are clips online of you and Kate onstage together in a production at Columbia University.

We lived together, we were in an improv group together. I always thought Kate was the funniest, most talented person I knew. But then you have this moment where you think, "Well, maybe that was just college." But I was right!

When I was casting and I called her, we laughed the whole time because I think we both had the same experience at that moment. For whatever reason, with the direction that our lives led us, I'm actually directing this movie, and she actually is a comedic genius who was recognized as such. And now we're adults, and I'm saying, "Do you want to come do this?" It was like, we'd gotten into a time machine when we were 18 and came out at 39. The reality is, we're still the 18-year-old kids who are making musicals. We actually didn't get more sophisticated than we were at 18.

Now that you've entered this world of big franchises, how will you balance your directing career going forward, between huge commercial films and smaller ones?

I think probably every director has a fantasy baseball league in their head of what movies they want to make. And there's some movies I'd like to make that require a big canvas. At the same time, I've seen so many directors move between bigger movies and smaller movies: Chloé Zhao doing *Nomadland* and making *Eternals*. Or Steven Soderbergh, or even my weekend buddy Chris Nolan. He made the *Dark Knight* trilogy — and they're wonderful — and then made *The Prestige*, which is not a tiny movie, but it is also not the same thing. I want to play in lots of different worlds. That's the goal.

There's footage out there of you directing the garden scene in *Ladybird,* and you seem so joyous. It feels like you love being a director.

I love it so much. I love every part of making a movie, soup to nuts. And Margot is the same way. For us, it's Disneyland every day. I honestly can't believe I get to do this.

You're a member of the Directors Guild, the Writers Guild, and the Actors Guild. The Writers Guild is already on strike, and the other guilds don't seem too happy, either. There are whispers of a tri-Guild walkout.

I'm really proud of being a union member. I'm in support 100 percent of however we come at this.

I'm living through this moment like everybody else is, especially in terms of the AI thing, which is terrifying and exciting. I don't know what to say about it. I guess it's clearly a tool that hopefully can be used to help. I think it's incredibly important to protect creative people — writers and directors and actors — because I don't think what they can do can be replicated. We have to set some very firm ground rules moving forward. Because otherwise, we're looking at a world that becomes a photocopy of a photocopy of a photocopy.

This feels like it would have been an insane question before *Barbie,* but would you want to do a superhero movie, or an action movie?

Yes, of course. It would have to be something I had a feeling for and a relationship to. A well-shot, well-executed action movie is just incredible. It's a dance. I've never done anything like that. But even in a small way, working with the stunt coordinator who did fight choreography on *Barbie*, he was just fascinating. It was so fun to talk to him.

I think *Barbie,* in a way, is already a superhero movie.

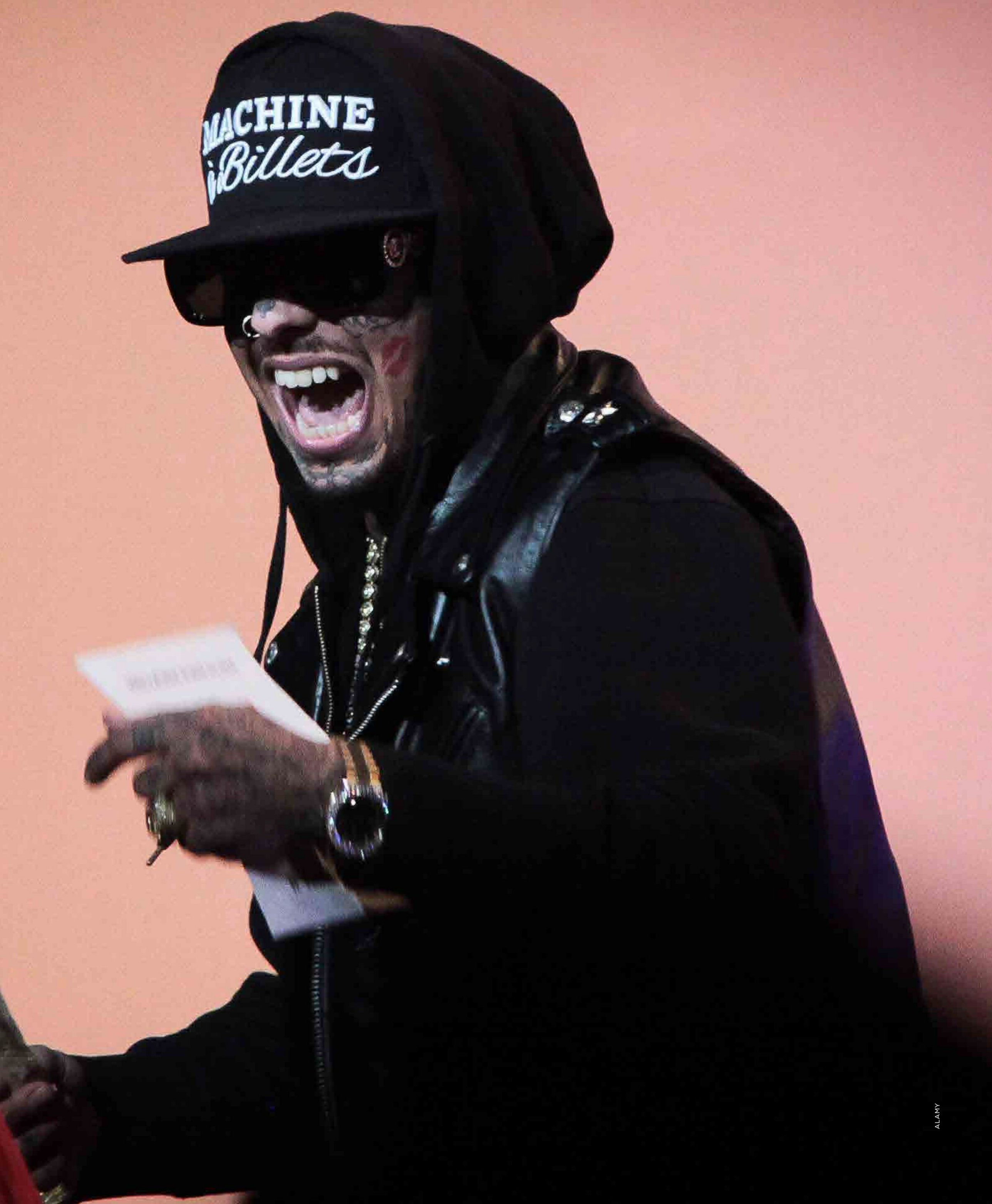
[*Laughs.*] Yeah, in a way. It's iconic in the same way. And it's sort of mythic in the same way. ®

JAAP BUITENDIJK/WARNER BROS.

THE FAST TIMES AND HIGH CRIMES OF A HIP-HOP GRIFTER

SWAGG MAN'S OPULENT LIFESTYLE LED TO A MASSIVE SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWING. NOW, HE'S ACCUSED OF SWINDLING HIS OWN FANS.

BY MARC WORTMAN



ALAMY

"WHO'S SWAGG MAN??"

the 36-year-old rapper currently wanted by the law poses the question to himself in a text to me. "I was born an artist ... Swagg Man is a fictif [fictional] guy. Same like all artist[s]."

I've been trying to talk to Swagg Man for weeks. He says we will meet in Paris; then he says Miami, where he can show me his car collection. Finally, unable to get him to fix a time and place, we speak for two hours via Zoom. He claims that this is his first time speaking to the press in six years, though even that is questionable.

Facing me in sunglasses and a backward black baseball cap, he's a charismatic figure. In his music videos, he comes across as handsome and lithe, in high-gloss designer wear and bejeweled accessories, striking poses, moving and dancing fluidly, often breaking into a raucous, almost delirious laugh, his klieg-light smile lighting up against his countless tats. In person, he is far calmer, speaking in a smoothly pleasing tenor that registers far higher in his songs.

"I never do something for the money," Swagg Man insists to me. When someone says it's not for the money, it's usually for the money. And few people love money like Swagg Man. In post after post, he caresses cash, licks his piles of jewels, and dances on his Bentley and his Lambo. "I do something for the pleasure," he continues, "for the passion first, and the money comes after."

But where exactly does Swagg Man, whose real name is Iteb Zaibet, get his money? That question has long dogged him. He stands accused of stealing or embezzling around $10 million over the past decade. He has allegedly scammed his own fans, his friends, and even a Swiss bank. The quest to untangle the real Swagg Man from the fictional artist has set off a global financial and legal brawl spreading to Switzerland, Tunisia, America, France, and the music industry that continues today. And the people and events involved shine a light on some of the complexities of class around the world — and the blinding allure of social media fame and wealth. They also reveal a great deal about the art of the con.

It should be said that Swagg Man denies the charges — every accusation, of which there are many. He calls those complaining against him "fake victims." He warns me, "Don't listen to internet gossip." In fact, he claims that all his legal troubles can be traced to just a single enemy, a person he calls a "stalker." He's a French Tunisian businessman living in Paris named Tarak Cheikh-Rouhou. Swagg Man writes to me: "I don't understand why this man ... has a hate against me. I've never met him; I've never spoken to him; I've never even written to him."

But Cheikh-Rouhou says he's on a crusade to stop someone he considers a dangerous con man: "Swagg Man is a scoundrel. And I hate scoundrels."

Swagg Man's hip-hop recordings have streamed more than 70 million times. But his alleged criminal enterprise long ago overshadowed his music. As we've talked over the past several months, an international warrant went out for his arrest. But he becomes incensed that I even bother asking him about the many allegations of swindles, frauds, and embezzlement that have swirled about him for years.

"Someone who started making music from 2009," he texts me, "who had millions of views, who had millions of streams, who had hundreds of concerts, who had hundreds of partnerships, who created a clothing brand, which created a language specific to itself, which on top of that, this same person speaks several languages and sings in several languages so reaches more people, how do you want this person to remain poor? How can this person not be able to make money? You have to stop at some point!! We have to stop inventing lives!!"

AMONG SWAGG MAN'S accusers is a French youth extreme-sports coach who was in his early twenties when he began to follow Swagg Man online. That was about a decade ago. He is 32 years old now and lives in a small city in central France. He prefers to remain anonymous, but he's gone by the pseudonym Pierre in the French media. I can tell you Pierre has broken his collarbone five times pursuing his sport.

At the time he met Swagg Man, the rapper was seemingly everywhere in French-language media. A hip-hop artist of indeterminate French and Arabic origins, he rapped in French, Arabic, English, and a little Spanish. His songs had already streamed tens of millions of times and had more than 30 million views on YouTube. He was by the early 2010s the sort of entertainer who had figured out the attention economy, combining the stylized, heavily tattooed look of a North African Arabic Post Malone with a mania for bundles of money and all it buys.

On a late-November morning in 2014, after a night of heavy partying, Pierre scrolled through Swagg Man's Facebook page. He read a comment viciously trolling the rapper, calling him "a son of a whore." Swagg Man, who was 27 years old at the time, was widely reported to have lost his parents as a young child. "I did, too," Pierre tells me. On the spur of the moment, still a little toasted, he messaged Swagg Man. "Ignore the insults," Pierre says he commiserated in the message. "Don't let them get you down."

To his surprise, a few hours later Swagg Man messaged him back. "It's your lucky day!" the rapper proclaimed buoyantly, according to Pierre. "It's going to be the best day of your life." Less than six months earlier, Swagg Man had released his first album. His songs were getting airtime on French hip-hop stations; he was appearing on talk shows. He seemed to be living large in Miami, traveling frequently to France to record interviews and videos, and vacationing in Tunisia, where he held dual French and Tunisian citizenship.

Swagg Man's music videos from around that time show him cruising and rapping, wearing high fashion and piles of gold and diamonds, driving in a white Bentley or various Lambos through South Beach, tossing around cash like confetti, and looking out from the back of a limousine rolling through a glittering Paris at night.

In his 2014 release "Billey," a slang spelling of the French word for cash, he raps out one luxury brand name after another: Louis, Louboutin, Versace, Bentley, Lambo, Cartier, Vacheron, and on and on. He was apparently living the life of a very rich man. Pierre tells me, "I'm not much for luxury, but he seemed to have a fine life."

The two exchanged more messages. At one point, Swagg Man's new friend told him he was looking to buy a small building as an investment, hoping for a better life, maybe a little more like the rap artist's. Swagg Man asked for Pierre's telephone number. He called.

PREVIOUS SPREAD PHOTOGRAPH BY THIBAULT STIPAL.
THIS PAGE: COURTESY OF SWAGG MAN/S.W.M ENTERTAINMENT

SWAGG STYLE
Designer clothes and jewels are part of the rapper's appeal.

"SWAGG MAN IS A SCOUNDREL," SAYS TARAK CHEIKH-ROUHOU, WHO IS ON A CRUSADE TO STOP THE RAPPER. "AND I HATE SCOUNDRELS."

He said he had a way for his new friend to triple his money. Fast.

More conversations ensued, sometimes several calls a day. Pierre was charmed by Swagg Man — "He made me laugh," Pierre says. "I found him funny." That went on for months. Swagg Man encouraged Pierre to invest, vowing that "it could not fail." If the impossible happened, Swagg Man promised, he would make him whole.

"I let myself be tempted."

SWAGG MAN'S longtime videographer, Lorenzo Vanin, says he "was one of the first to put himself on the internet in France." With more than 200 music videos and countless Instagram posts, Swagg Man tells me he has presented "60 percent" of his life online. And money has figured in his online existence from the start.

His rise to fame began by burning money. Literally. He shot a poor-quality video around 2009 in which he set fire to multiple €500 notes — what looks to be a few thousand euros in all — on a street in Paris while onlookers gaped. Swagg Man claims the millions who watched the video made him enough money to begin recording music videos. Eventually he was able to launch his Swaggman World Music Entertainment production company. "If you don't have the money, nobody can watch you," he says.

Swagg Man tells me his steady production of videos and brand sponsorships began bringing in anywhere from $100,000 to $300,000 each (numbers I couldn't verify). He released two albums, 2014's *Swagg Man Posey* and 2015's *MST,* and went on tour, performing at clubs in French-speaking lands. Neither album sold particularly well, even in France.

Online, though, he took off, thanks to his outrageous Swagg Man persona. Since he released *Swagg Man Posey,* his songs have streamed more than 73 million times, according to DistroKid. Although he has released a few English-language rap songs, he never fully crossed over to wider audiences. (He tells me three of his songs have gone gold streaming to American listeners — but that isn't true.)

Swagg Man did seem to have the French and Arabic youth beat down. He claimed he came from the streets and rapped about his immense fortune. In a world in which the deck is generally stacked against people like him, a rigged game he wasn't destined to win, somehow Swagg Man made it.

He even started his own fashion line, branded Posey Bro, pronounced "posé." He says to me, "'Posey Bro' is a word I invented in France. [It] means, 'I'm quietly sitting doing nothing, my brother.'" He claims to have become an ambassador for multiple luxury brands and tattooed himself with Versace, Louis Vuitton, and MCM logos. But inquiries to those and other luxury companies about sponsorship deals with him brought no replies.

His apparently self-made fortune and spectacular excess made him an object of media fascination in francophone Europe, and North Africa, too. In a 2015 interview, Swagg Man told the august *Le Monde,* France's equivalent of *The New York Times,* that his real name is "Rayan Sanches" and that his Tunisian-Jewish mother and Brazilian father abandoned him as a child on the streets and that he cycled through foster homes after that. He said he DJ'd big-money gigs in Dubai, bought his first Rolex at age 20, acquired properties, built a production business, made music, and produced his videos. While appearing on France's Canal Plus television in 2016, he insisted that his most meaningful goal in flaunting his lifestyle is to prove that "anyone can make it," an uncommon notion in stay-in-your-lane France.

During his rise, Swagg Man has repeated that origin story several times. And he's inked it on his body, too. Tats from skull to toe make him look like a living cross between a Cy Twombly scribble painting and a Basquiat graffiti canvas.

"Each tattoo represents a very specific moment in my life," he tells me. Among the moments they signify are his first million dollars and his first car. He has transformed his shaved scalp into an LV-logo handbag and covered his face with lipstick smooches, phrases, and swirling designs.

"All those tattoos I got on my face," he writes me, "were made so that I couldn't look like who I was anymore."

English script across his forehead reads: "Everyday is my birthday." He explains to me, "And every day is really my birthday. Because everyday u are blessed, everyday you [are] reborn again."

If you live your life wearing a mask, you can become anyone you want to be.

Again and again.

LOTS OF RAPPERS invent personas. It goes hand in glove with the business. But Swagg Man never dropped his mask, even when he seemed to offer an intimate glimpse of the "real" person behind it to his fans.

"He's a great actor," Pierre says. "He has been playing a role his whole life." The stories Swagg Man told *Le Monde* about his birth and childhood, even his name, are fabrications. In reality, he now admits to

me, Iteb Zaibet was born in Nice, France, to parents who emigrated from Tunisia. Swagg Man says that as a child he and his father had problems, leading to their estrangement. He left home and spent time with another family — he won't tell me much about them, just that they became his surrogate family.

That family called him "Rayan Sanches," he says. He claims that is the name he has on his U.S. green card and that he's legally changing his name to it, "because my first and last name remind me of too much suffering." He says that he no longer has any contact with people in Nice.

But still, even now, he is apparently twisting the truth into knots. Photographs from about a decade ago show a smiling Swagg Man with his father and with his twin sister.

A French Italian journalist and author, Oli Porri Santoro, was among the first to report on these controversies surrounding Swagg Man's life. Porri Santoro grew up near Swagg Man in what he describes as a "poor," sometimes "dangerous" neighborhood in Nice, and the journalist has spoken to Swagg Man's best friend from childhood and to his twin sister.

Porri Santoro tells me that Swagg Man has an older brother and two other sisters and that Swagg Man's father and mother divorced at some point, and his mother raised him and his siblings in the family home in Nice, where she continues to live. Porri Santoro says Swagg Man remains in touch with his father, Hamadi Zaibet, who lives in Tunisia. But a 2019 interview in Arabic with his father posted online includes a French translation of him saying that he does not understand his son's "mythomania."

When I try to ask Swagg Man about the sketchy, contradictory details of his past, all he'll say is, "It's private."

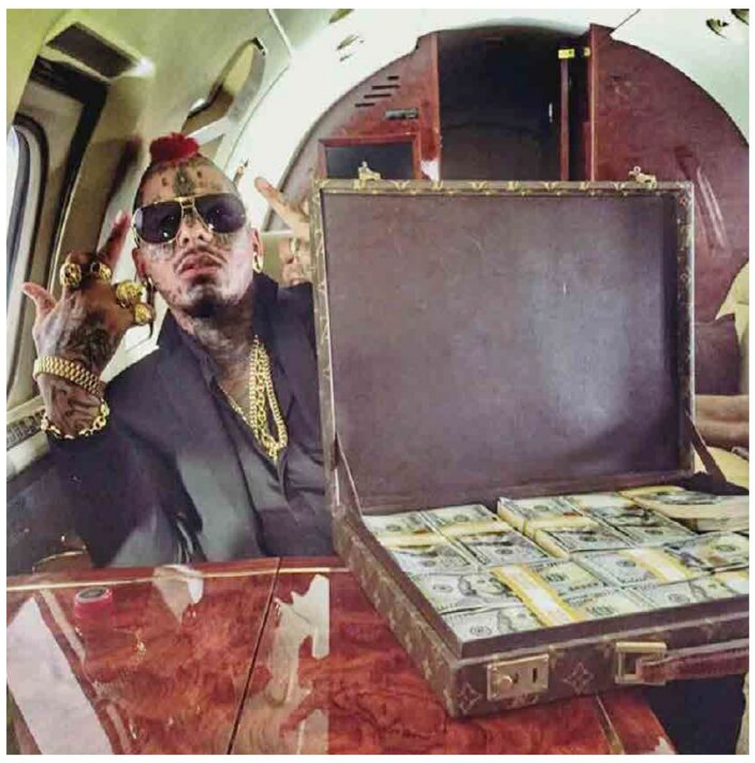
What he wants to talk about is that he was a good dancer as a child, loved music, and "learned to play instruments thanks to the streets." But he says he stumbled into trouble early on. He claims that he got busted for possession of cocaine around age 18 or 19, though he denies to me ever using it, insisting he carried the coke solely to "flirt with a woman." By his account, he spent eight months of a two-and-a-half-year sentence in Nanterre prison, outside Paris. But Porri Santoro believes all of this is also made up. Truth with Swagg Man is fluid.

In any case, Swagg Man claims that while doing time he underwent an epiphany that transformed him. It was, he claims, seeing the movie *Scarface* that changed his life.

"I saw that film, and I said, 'Wow, wow, wow!' If he came to the U.S.A., without money, and right now he's a billionaire, if he can do that, I can do that. But I can do that *legally,*" he emphasizes. "Not illegally."

It's a strange interpretation of *Scarface* to ignore Tony Montana's drug-fueled, violent criminality. But Swagg Man insists to me later via WhatsApp, "If I live SCARFACE [*his emphasis*], it's because he [has] a message: Believe [in] yourself and never give up."

Swagg Man says he served a second, shorter term for burning the cash in that 2009 video, an act illegal enough to count as a parole violation, at least according to him. Twenty-four hours after his release, he remembers going to Miami to see if he could live his own version of *Scarface*. "Let's start a new life," he told himself. He had keys and the word "Libertad," for freedom, tattooed on his face. "Let's accept to be reborn," he declares to me.



LUSH LIFE
Swagg Man shows off cash and watches on social media.

In September 2015, Swagg Man married Lolita Rebulard, a French woman three years younger than him, in Miami Beach. According to journalist Porri Santoro, she may be "the boss" behind the schemes tied to Swagg Man. But Swagg Man insists Rebulard is "a girl from a good family who has never caused anyone a problem, but with whom I am no longer, unfortunately."

When I ask him to put me in touch with Rebulard, Swagg Man says, "I am not in contact with her." (Rebulard did not respond to Rolling Stone's requests for comment.)

However, according to property documents, Swagg Man and Rebulard share control of a company called Luxury Properties, holding deeds on two apartments in Miami luxury high-rises their company purchased in 2022, allegedly with money they embezzled.

To some followers, Swagg Man's displays of outsize wealth symbolized a life they wanted. And because he was celebrated in the media, he seemed like someone who could be trusted. Pierre, the French former youth-extreme sports coach who reached out to him after the insult about being an orphan, ultimately agreed to Swagg Man's offers to invest money on his behalf. Pierre says Swagg Man insisted that he deliver the money — 25,000 euros — in cash. On Dec. 16, 2014, Pierre took a three-hour train ride to Paris to meet Swagg Man in a hotel near the Gare de Lyon, court documents show. They chatted. Swagg Man invited Pierre to try on his jewelry. And his fan handed over an envelope of cash.

A few weeks later, according to court documents, Swagg Man called Pierre to say he had not only succeeded in tripling his original investment but also had tripled *that* sum, for a total payout of a quarter-million euros. Before passing on the earnings, Swagg Man said Pierre had to first pay the 15,000-euro tax on the 235,000-euro gain. "I didn't have that much," Pierre recalls. "He asked how much I had and said he would make up the difference."

Pierre sent 8,900 euros to Swagg Man in Miami via Western Union in the fall of 2015, according to court filings. "He played me," Pierre says.

After several more months of waiting and increasingly vague promises from Swagg Man that he would soon get his money, Pierre saw a post online describing someone in a similar financial situation with Swagg Man. Pierre contacted the poster, and she told him her story. Pierre finally realized, "He was a con man."

But Swagg Man continued to reach new people willing to trust him with their money, like the former sports trainer I spoke to from a town north of Paris. The trainer asked to remain anonymous, so I'll call him Jean. Jean was 22 years old when he reached out to Swagg Man. He didn't particularly consider himself a fan but was looking for ways to make enough money to help his brother with a medical treatment. Seeing Swagg Man's obvious great wealth, Jean contacted him on May 11, 2015, asking for suggestions about ways to make more money fast, according to court documents. Swagg Man replied, and they Skyped.

"I laughed with him," Jean says now. "He seemed to be a friend. I thought there was more to him." Swagg Man promised to help Jean find "the best doctors" for his brother and invited him to meet at the luxurious hotel Le Meurice in Paris to discuss investing with him. Jean says he agreed to wire 5,000 euros to Swagg Man's designated recipient, and that Swagg Man "promised me things that make one dream."

But over the next several months, Swagg Man rarely responded to Jean's messages until, in June 2017, the trainer says, Swagg Man wrote a pleading message that he was in prison for unspecified reasons and needed 2,000 euros to regain his freedom. "I feared I'd never get my money back," Jean says. So he wired the money to Swagg Man.

THIS PAGE: COURTESY OF SWAGG MAN/S.W.M ENTERTAINMENT, 2.
OPPOSITE PAGE: GETTYIMAGES

Then came another request for more help resolving legal troubles. On Sept. 12, 2017, Jean wired along another 2,230 euros. Caught up in the cycle of promises, problems, and money wired away, Jean explains that he felt lost, "like gears turning within gears," good money chasing bad. After the fourth time giving Swagg Man money, "he disappeared." Finally, Jean says, "I knew it was a con. Everything became clear. Years of savings gone. I wanted to help my brother. I was devastated."

Numerous others have shared similar stories online, of following Swagg Man and then reaching out to him, meeting him, seemingly becoming his friend, always the laughter and confidential glimpses into his life, followed by the invitation to have a piece in ultra-high-return investments — usually secret, though sometimes cryptocurrency — that had made him wealthy. Then watching him vanish from contact. But the true number of victims and total amounts swindled are impossible to tally.

Cheikh-Rouhou says that most of the alleged victims tell him they handed Swagg Man cash, making it virtually impossible to prove, and many remain too poor to mount the complex legal fight to recover their money.

It wasn't just his own fans whom Swagg Man was allegedly swindling, though. His largest strike came from a connection made deep on the dark web that led to the attempted looting of some 15 million dollars from a Swiss bank.

SWAGG MAN NEVER DROPPED HIS MASK. "HE'S A GREAT ACTOR," SAYS AN ALLEGED VICTIM. "HE HAS BEEN PLAYING A ROLE HIS WHOLE LIFE."

BOTTOMS UP
Excess is key to Swagg Man's public persona.

THE FORMER SWISS BANKER asks that I not use his real name. He recalls that in 2018 he was "in big financial distress" and "depressed." Thirty-one years old at the time, he says, "I needed to do something about my life." He was a client adviser for Raiffeisen Bank, Switzerland's third-largest bank. In that position, he says, "I knew which clients would have been more suitable [for embezzling] because of their habits — and wealth, of course."

Shortly before Christmas, the banker copied out a few clients' online-banking-access information and passwords. Having alerted the clients to a system upgrade that would shut down their online access, on Dec. 20, he says, "I disabled those e-banking accesses and made the wire transfers."

On Dec. 21, he sent the money to two recipients he'd met on the dark web who agreed to launder it for him, less a commission. The banker didn't know who they were — and recognized the risks in working with people he'd never met. "I had many, many red flags already in the first messages from Zaibet." But he was desperate.

Money was siphoned out of the Raiffeisen clients' accounts electronically in two directions: $6 million to a private account in Tunisia and roughly $9 million to the SunTrust Bank account of Luxury Properties. From there, the recipients promised, money would arrive in untraceable bitcoins waiting for the banker in Panama.

The next day, he flew to Panama thinking his new life was just over the horizon. But as often happens, unanticipated circumstances tripped up the crook. A customer happened to go to a Raiffeisen branch to make an unrelated transaction; by chance, he discovered $3 million was missing from his account. The bank shortly found all the other illegal transactions. The funds wired to the Luxury Properties account in Florida were stopped and rerouted back to Raiffeisen. But the money sent to Zaibet's personal account in Tunisia arrived.

Alerted to a possible crime, the Tunisian central bank blocked his account until the matter could get clarified.

Swagg Man continues to contest the reason he received the Swiss bank accounts' funds. He insists that the millions came to him when he was acting as a middleman in a legitimate "commercial transaction."

Trapped in Panama, the banker turned himself in to authorities. As he flew back to face charges of bank theft, for which he eventually received a five-and-a-half-year sentence, Swagg Man was in Miami. But he would shortly make a move to Los Angeles, where he would embark on the biggest opportunity of his musical career.

HAZEY "HAZE" TAUGHTME, owner of Haze Ent., an entertainment management and marketing firm, was on tour with some of his clients at a Miami show where he met Swagg Man in January 2019. "Swagg seen we had real motion," Taughtme says. "I only knew him as an artist who wanted to get real music.... I wanted to help Swagg Man cross over. And he said he had the budget."

With Taughtme organizing the session, Swagg Man headed to L.A. in March to record a six-to-eight-song EP at the famous Record Plant recording studios. Brian Kennedy, a Grammy Award-nominated producer and songwriter of hits by Rihanna, Chris Brown, Jennifer Hudson, and many others, was producing the project.

Taughtme says Swagg Man's EP had as its working title — appropriately enough — *Change the Face*. Swagg Man was on the cusp of achieving an ultimate artistic dream.

But that dream cost plenty. At $3,000 a day for a week in the studio, Taughtme says, plus $25,000 upfront for Kennedy's time, plus tens of thousands more to keep up his image and his hip-hop lifestyle, Swagg Man was likely burning through money.He flew off to Tunisia in April 2019. Taughtme says Swagg Man told him he'd been booked to appear on a popular Tunisian talk and variety show, contending that an appearance, according to Taughtme, would double his social media following in the country.

Swagg Man says to me, however, that he traveled to Tunisia at the behest of his lawyer there, who said he needed to answer the money-laundering complaint. "I was not afraid because I have nothing to hide," he insists.

He nevertheless appeared on the Arabic-language television show, pose-y as usual. He protested against the Tunisian authorities' accusation that millions from the Raiffeisen Bank were not his own. But he tells me, "when I exposed the problem with the government trying to rob my money," within a few days his "nightmare" began. The Tunisian justice ministry continued to hold the money and barred him from leaving the country. He insists, "It's all about the money. It's all about the money." In July 2019, he was jailed on charges of money laundering.

While languishing in prison, his troubles compounded. Twenty victims of Swagg Man's schemes pressed charges against him in a Tunisian court — with many traveling to Tunisia to testify. People in the group — from France, Belgium, Canada, Tunisia, Switzerland, and Algeria — claimed he stole the equivalent of more than $1.5 million from them, including one victim who lost 800,000 euros.

Many of the victims confronted Swagg Man at pretrial hearings. When Pierre stood before him, the rapper claimed he'd "never seen me before," Pierre remembers. "I promised I would never let him go."

Jean, the trainer who wanted to make money to help his sick brother, traveled to Tunisia, too. In October 2019, he finally stood before Swagg Man. "He cried," Jean recalls. "He knew he was going to prison. I had all the proof." But due to Covid, the 20 victims pressing charges would have to wait months for a final judgment — and then justice would be even further delayed.

Even now, Swagg Man insists that these were all "false victims ... convinced to come and file a complaint" against him. They are part of a conspiracy to swindle him out of his money, in a scheme cooked up, he insists, by one man: Tarak Cheikh-Rouhou.

Swagg Man and Cheikh-Rouhou could not be more different for similarly aged French men of Tunisian origins. The 39-year-old Cheikh-Rouhou comes from a storied Tunisian family on his father's side. (His mother is from Vietnam.) His grandfather fought against the French colonial occupation and founded a resistance newspaper that continues to publish in Tunisia. After a Tunisian dictator forced the family into exile, they settled in France.

"I grew up in an aristocratic family," Cheikh-Rouhou says, "but we left Tunisia quickly. My father was afraid for his family. We left everything." Cheikh-Rouhou was educated in France in business and computer science and now invests and operates small companies in France and Tunisia, and works as a public-affairs consultant. When I spoke to him via Zoom in his Paris apartment, he wore a silk cravat around his neck. Art was on the walls behind him, and he showed me terrace views of the rooftops of Paris.

Despite the immense cultural gulf between them, Cheikh-Rouhou says that he initially felt sympathy for Swagg Man after watching him on that 2019 Tunisian TV show. "Everybody was talking about him," Cheikh-Rouhou recalls, switching between French and fluent English. He remembers Swagg Man saying on the show that he wanted to get the millions of dollars from his blocked account to build a hotel, orphanage, and mosque in the country. Cheikh-Rouhou tells me he was scandalized that Swagg Man was being targeted when he was just trying to help his country. Corruption was rampant in Tunisia, where democracy remains fragile, and he believed a government seizure of private funds on trumped-up pretenses was entirely plausible. Cheikh-Rouhou says, "I just wanted to help him." He knew people in the government who could possibly intervene. But, he says, "the people I contacted said, 'He is not what he says he is on television.'" Cheikh-Rouhou started investigating.

He quickly realized, "he attacked victims." Cheikh-Rouhou now believes "he must be stopped. There are too many victims, too many poor victims who lost everything."

For his part, Swagg Man claims Cheikh-Rouhou "orchestrated" the entire effort to scorch his name in order to "blackmail" him for money.

Cheikh-Rouhou says he feels personally affronted at Swagg Man's having brought dishonor upon Tunisia, a poor nation he says but one rich in cultural heritage. "Tunisia is a small country. Everybody knows each other. If you see the son of someone you know doing bad things, would you give him a spanking?"

And Cheikh-Rouhou agrees that he is trying to bring Swagg Man down: "Yes, I admit to having helped dozens of people ... by convincing them to take legal action in Tunisia." Reaching out to as many victims as he could find willing to go public with their tales, he formed and supported the victims' consortium, called Swag Auxilium. He persuaded and aided the victims in pursuing charges in Tunisia. He also started posting online materials about Swagg Man's alleged crimes and went to the press, resulting in multiple articles that appeared in French and North African media reporting on the accusations against Swagg Man.

After that, "I was raped by the media," Swagg Man says.

In March 2021, while still being held in a Tunisian prison, Swagg Man was tried and found guilty of money laundering in the Raiffeisen Bank embezzlement case. He was sentenced to five years in prison. In the meantime, the charges brought by the members of the Swag Auxilium association slowly worked their way through the Tunisian justice system.

But even before then, Swagg Man was on to his next alleged con.

NEMESIS

NEMESIS Cheikh-Rouhou (below) initially sympathized with Swagg Man.

IN APRIL 2020, with her husband in legal limbo in Tunisia, Lolita Rebulard was introduced by a mutual acquaintance, a lawyer working on Swagg Man's behalf, to an older French husband-and-wife team who own and operate businesses in Tunisia. Embarrassed by their experience, they ask that I not identify them by name, so I'll call them Hugo and Catherine. I spoke to them in French at their home in Tunisia with their lawyer, Wassim Benzarti. Rebulard told the couple about her husband's troubles. The three of them could see the possibilities for working with Swagg Man to leverage what he claimed was his great fame in America.

Hugo says of Rebulard, "She was modest, with the face of an angel." Catherine adds, "She was more normal appearing [than Swagg Man]. She cried all the time and swore that they hadn't swindled anyone." The couple took a liking to Swagg Man, too, and believed his story about the Tunisian

THIS PAGE, TOP: COURTESY OF TARAK CHEIKH-ROUHOU. OPPOSITE PAGE: COURTESY OF HAZEY TAUGHTME

government victimizing him. "We took pity on him," Hugo says.

The couple say they helped support Rebulard financially. And they negotiated a deal with her to brand merchandise with Swagg Man and paid for his lawyers. Then, on Jan. 13, 2022, a Tunisian appeals court reversed the charges against him — although the finance ministry continued to block the money wired to him from the Raiffeisen Bank.

Around that same time, Hugo and Catherine purchased a luxury apartment Swagg Man identified for them as an investment in Fort Lauderdale. Swagg Man disputes that such a deal ever happened. But bank-transfer documents filed in court show that in December 2021 and January 2022 the couple made four wire transfers totaling 1.5 million euros destined for the purchase of the Fort Lauderdale property.

But there was no apartment. That luxury property wasn't purchased for the couple — the apartment hadn't even been up for sale. According to the couple's attorney, Swagg Man and Rebulard instead directed the couple's money get wired to AAA Plus Financial Group, a firm owned by Johnny Previlus. Swagg Man tells me Previlus is "my accountant." In texts to me, Previlus at first says Swagg Man "is not in my client or friends circle." But then he adds, "I met him for a very short period as a client, and thereafter he traveled abroad. The next news I heard was that he went to jail." He told me to contact his lawyer after I pressed him on his dealings with Swagg Man.

According to the lawsuit, AAA moved Hugo and Catherine's misdirected money immediately to purchase two real luxury apartments in Miami on Biscayne Boulevard and several valuable watches on behalf of Luxury Properties, a company owned by Rebulard and Swagg Man. Hugo and Catherine are now suing Swagg Man, Rebulard, and their Luxury Properties, seeking restitution of their money. But Swagg Man and Rebulard's Miami attorney, David P. Reiner II, wrote to me that the lawsuit has nothing to do with the properties. Instead, Reiner describes it as an attempt by the French couple to get money from Swagg Man to cover what they lost on bad cryptocurrency investments. Reiner contends, "Everyone who lost money when the crypto markets collapsed is looking for someone to blame."

But Hugo and Catherine's Florida attorney, David Haft, scoffs at the notion. "There are bank records," he says, "wire instructions from [his clients] to Zaibet, for a supposed acquisition of a Fort Lauderdale property. Why was the money sent to AAA Financial if it was intended for Iteb Zaibet?" A Tunisian court agreed, finding, in October 2022, Rebulard and Zaibet, who did not return for the trial, guilty of fraud in the case. A three-year sentence for that conviction hangs over them.

FOR THE RECORD
With producer Brian Kennedy at his L.A. studio.

SWAGG MAN HIMSELF SAYS HE'S "SOMEONE MYSTERIOUS THAT PEOPLE INVENT LIVES ON. BECAUSE THEY CAN'T GET IN TOUCH WITH HIM."

SWAGG MAN FACES a world of trouble — if he gets caught. On Feb. 22 of this year, a Tunisian court found him guilty of defrauding the 20 victims. He did not attend the trial. In absentia, he received a 20-year sentence, a year for each victim. An international warrant has gone out for his arrest. He has since publicly renounced his Tunisian citizenship. A Tunisian superior court also sent the reversal of the previous decision on the Raiffeisen money-laundering matter back to the appeals court for further investigation and possible retrial. And, according to Benzarti, Swagg Man faces a judicial inquiry in France about his alleged embezzlement of funds from Hugo and Catherine while in Tunisia.

But it's catch me if you can.

I communicated with Swagg Man over the course of several weeks during the period when his 20 victims' cases were decided in Tunisia. He insists he continues to operate without fear. "I can travel anywhere in the world." At one point while discussing his travels, he tells me, "I love getting on my plane and going to other countries like Brazil, Costa Rica, Puerto Rico." He says he flies in "a Cessna Citation," a private jet he says he rents.

I invite Swagg Man to guide me to people who can verify what he tells me about his life. But, he says, nobody beside him, his videographer Vanin, his lawyers, and "a few artists" know who he truly is.

"Everything else is just crap ... because who is Swagg Man?" he ponders. "Swagg Man is someone extremely mysterious that people invent lives on him. Why? Because they can't get in touch with him."

After I pose what is apparently too many pointed questions about the criminal evidence against him, he finally stops responding to my messages.

The mysteries shrouding Swagg Man remain. In one of our last interactions he says he's in Tulum and will soon be back in Miami. He writes me, "I promise to you I [will] see you soon in Miami. I swear."

The Top 11 Movies of Hayao Miyazaki

One of the most revered animators in the history of the medium, his works are the most prolific, appealing, and exquisitely drawn tales of amazement

DEBASHREE DUTTA

I RECKON THAT Hayao Miyazaki draws ideas for his stories from real-world experiences and subsequently uses his boundless imagination to produce them into adventures, fantasies, epic sagas, or pretty much anything else. His movies are universally acclaimed as family-friendly entertainment. Even though many of his works are intended for children, they have deeper meanings for adults to consider and act upon.

Miyazaki is indisputably the most celebrated Japanese animator, director, manga artist, and co-founder of Studio Ghibli, revered for his legendary Japanese animated feature films. One of the most gifted animators in the history of the medium, his works are the most prolific, appealing, and exquisitely drawn tales of amazement. I've included a selection of the top 11 below.

The Castle of Cagliostro *(1979)*

A STUNNING TAPESTRY of vivid creativity—with a swashbuckling thief, his band of outlaws, and a dauntless cop taking on a vile lord to free a princess and untangle the secret of a treasure— It is the sophomore film starring master thief Lupin III from the same-titled manga series by Japanese manga artist Monkey Punch and Hayao Miyazaki's debut feature film. Exciting with unique levity, aesthetics, and ethnic allusions, *The Castle of Cagliostro* underscores Miyazaki's inimitable style.

Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind *(1984)*

A TEENAGE PRINCESS from the "Valley of the Wind" gets embroiled in a duel with the kingdom of Tolmekia when it tries to exterminate a forest replete with massive mutant bugs. We encounter a post-nuclear dystopian time when she embarks on her mission to appease the strife-torn scenario. Critically, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* is one of the best anime films ever produced. In my mind, it's a sci-fi fantasy, in a class of its own—nothing less than an artistic achievement brimming with hope and invaluable life lessons.

Castle in the Sky *(1986)*

MIYAZAKI'S SENSE of the sublime uncovers the most astounding expression of adventure, delight, and romance intertwined at their finest in this rich narrative laden with exquisite visual content. Miyazaki's films are too good for me to view critically. They are sheer genius, with *Castle in the Sky* being no exception. How ingeniously the director conjures up the story of a boy and girl who, armed with a magic crystal, must outrun pirates and secret servicemen to locate an infamous floating castle and its numerous treasures!

My Neighbor Totoro *(1988)*

YOU WON'T LIKELY be unfamiliar with this jewel if you're into Miyazaki and Ghibli films. A fervent experience, *My Neighbor Totoro* is distinctly more than a movie—it's brilliant, beautiful, and cathartic in its unassuming charm, which may rekindle your childhood heyday memories. Two little girls are introduced to us when they move to the countryside to care for their sickly mother. There, they set out on escapades with a mammoth forest spirit discovered in the neighborhood. As you follow them, essential ideas about animism, ecology, and the joys of rural life are sensitively put forth through these most adorable characters.

Kiki's Delivery Service *(1989)*

KIKI, A TEENAGE witch in her required year of independence, struggles to blend into a new ethos while sustaining herself through an air delivery service, evolving through experiences of self-exploration thereby. It's remarkably impressive how Miyazaki leverages Kiki's journey to demystify the variances between freedom and dependency on the path to adulthood and the potential roadblocks one encounters along the way—ambiguities, aversions, moral dilemmas, and so on.

Porco Rosso *(1992)*

ONCE A HIGHLY decorated Italian World War I pilot, Porco Rosso got cursed into an anthropomorphic pig and now earns money in the Adriatic Sea, hunting down "air pirates." He sets off to expel the pirate gang with the aid of a sassy girl mechanic and his lifelong buddy. *Porco Rosso*, set in 1930s Italy, is a stellar adventure-fantasy tale that triumphs in its wit, irony, and dazzling visual grandeur.

Princess Mononoke *(1997)*

A SCRUPULOUSLY MADE adult historical fantasy film of serious matters—nature, sexuality, and impairment; a morally dubious conflict between human growth and a need to sustain nature—together with loss of innocence, dual consciousness, autonomy, and conformist society, with fate and hope thrown in for good measure. *Princess Mononoke* relates to a young Emishi prince, Ashitaka, in late Muromachi-era Japan, at war between a forest's deities and humans who raid its resources. The picture is at the vanguard of imagination and visual art. Its strong, soul-stirring sentimentality and ideals expressed via fully fleshed-out characters lend more meaning to the story.

Spirited Away *(2001)*

A CLASSIC PER SE, this film—the recipient of the biggest awards worldwide—is rightfully recognized as one of the greatest films ever. A melancholy 10-year-old girl named Chihiro is given to us as her family is relocating to the suburbs. Chihiro wanders off, winding up in a mystical land run by gods, witches, and spirits where people are transformed into creatures. To free herself and her parents, she now needs to work there. The story lingers in your memory, evoking in viewers of all ages an enchanting, eloquent dream of wonder, thrills, and delight—representing Miyazaki's creative brilliance maybe to the best extent.

Howl's Moving Castle *(2004)*

SOPHIE'S ONLY KEY to undoing a witch's curse causing her young body to age is Howl, a young wizard, and his friends living in a magical, moving castle. Based on Media reports, Miyazaki's opposition to the 2003 American invasion of Iraq is what inspired the movie's vehement anti-war themes. It also promotes love and devotion in life—a life that is so worth living and offers mystery and a variety of rich, exotic panoramas you'd love to explore and immerse yourself in.

Ponyo *(2008)*

***PONYO* IS ETHEREAL,** engrossing, captivating, and, at its cutest, an opus I can enjoy over and over again. It kind of mesmerizes me with its exotic setting, the way it whisks me away to a fantasy life under the ocean, and the enigma of it all, which keeps me curious until the very end. As I see the five-year-old Sosuke bonding with Ponyo (a tiny goldfish princess who yearns to be a human after falling for him), I'd be like, "Take me to your unfettered world, guys." It's so beguiling. Watch it.

The Wind Rises *(2013)*

AN INTENSE PORTRAYAL of Japanese aviation engineer Jiro Horikoshi, whose illustrious career includes the creation of fighter aircraft during World War II. As an introspective memoir, it also sheds light on Jiro's aching love life and the steadily worsening condition of his wife, who passed away after a protracted battle with tuberculosis. It is one of Miyazaki's most significant, albeit unusual, renditions—highly thought-provoking in its entirety.

STUDIO GHIBLI, COURTESY OF IMDB

Reviews

Music

KIM PETRAS MAKES HER BIG MOVE

One of pop's most interesting artists polishes her weird edges to go for radio-ready gold

By BRITTANY SPANOS

Kim Petras
Feed the Beast
REPUBLIC

It has taken Kim Petras 15 years to get a debut album out. In the interim, the German singer-songwriter's steady rise has made her one to watch among pop artists: Her "Era 1" singles, released from 2017 to 2019, were a cool homage to fizzy 2000s bubblegum, and her pair of Halloween-themed mixtapes were edgy, spooky fun. Earlier this year, Petras became the first trans artist to have a Number One hit, with her Sam Smith collaboration "Unholy."

But the journey to *Feed the Beast* hasn't been all Champagne and glitter. Her continued work with Dr. Luke has been troublesome to many music fans, due to accusations of sexual assault and abuse that have kept the producer locked →

ILLUSTRATION BY
Nigel Buchanan

KIM PETRAS

in an ongoing legal battle with Kesha. Then, after signing to a major label in 2021, Petras' original debut album, *Problematique,* was scrapped entirely and eventually leaked.

Petras has described her new release as her most "personal" work to date, a project forsaking the characters she embodied on her *Turn Off the Lights* Halloween projects or even last year's *Slut Pop* EP. But somehow this album feels like we've gotten even further from who Petras is creatively, losing the weird magnetism and spark that made her past eras feel so fun and against the grain.

Largely, Petras' new material seems heavily inspired by Nineties house and Europop. Lead single "Alone," featuring a surprisingly low-energy Nicki Minaj guest verse, samples Alice Deejay's 1999 hit "Better Off Alone," adding unnecessary trap hi-hats into the mix. Much of the album is comprised of similarly cheap ploys for radio and TikTok play, making the often trendsetting Petras a copy of many copies. Tracks like "King of Hearts" and "Claws" sound like an onslaught of overpriced vodka sodas: watered down and indiscernible from the next one.

It's not all bad news: "Coconuts," released last year, is still a sunshine-y bop. "Revelations" features a steely bit of Eighties guitar and a chorus that feels like a nod to her spooky-pop history. While most of the songs are extremely horny, "Sex Talk" and "Hit It From the Back" are the sexiest of the sex songs, commendable for their directness and sense of humor.

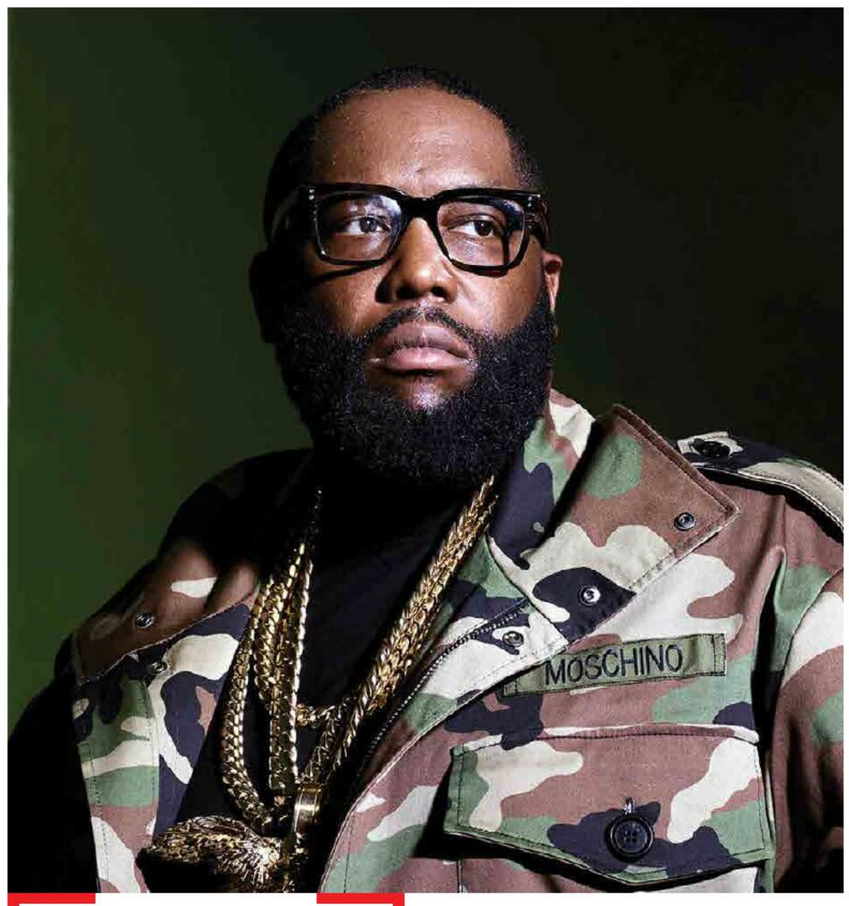
"Minute" exudes some of that vulnerability Petras promised from the album: It's a straightforward yearning love song about wanting someone to stay just a little longer. Meanwhile, "uh oh" is a classic Petras party track. She sings "Everything I drop is a banger" on the chorus, which is true of the song but falls flat when thinking of the rest of the album.

Of course, even the weaker songs have their dance-floor potential. Petras is, above all else, a pure fan of pop music and the feeling it exudes. But in chasing her new status as the type of pop star who has Top 40 potential, she abandoned the freakishly forward-thinking personality that built her a base to begin with. Here, the beast has been tamed. Let's hope it doesn't stay subdued much longer. ®

THE RETURN OF KILLER MIKE

The hard-hitting Atlanta rapper gets personal on his first album in 11 years By MOSI REEVES

In the Aughts, Killer Mike was a fiery maelstrom, the South's answer to Ice Cube, and an Atlanta polemicist comfortable with both dope-boy fantasies and bruising Black politics. But it's been 11 years since *R.A.P. Music,* a classic pairing with rapper-producer El-P that inspired the two to form the world-conquering duo Run the Jewels. On his sixth album, *Michael,* the rapper focuses on his personal life, with uncharacteristic empathy and restraint, even as he continues to utilize his uniquely brusque vocal style.



Killer Mike
Michael
GRIND TIME OFFICIAL

Michael is a collaboration with No I.D., the Chicago producer and label exec not only known for his Nineties classics with Common but also for adding flourishes to recent epics like Jay-Z's *4:44* and Vince Staples' *Summertime '06*. His maximalist impulses result in a cascade of gospel cries and church-y organs. A panoply of guests lends a hand, from El-P on "Don't Let the Devil" to Young Thug on "Run." There are some welcome surprises, including a rare André 3000 cameo (alongside Future, no less) on "Scientists & Engineers."

All of these celebrity guests, spiritual uplift, and florid old-soul samples may be anathema to hardcore rap fans. Meanwhile, anyone waiting for Mike to explain his increasingly complicated politics, and how he went from Bernie fan to supporting Georgia's GOP governor, will have to make do with the undeniably thrilling yet frustratingly vague "Talkn' That Shit!" "Niggas talk to me about that woke-ass shit/ Same niggas walkin' on some broke-ass shit," he raps over a memorably grimy beat from DJ Paul of Three 6 Mafia and TWhy Xclusive.

Despite the sometimes-overwrought musical backdrop, Killer Mike remains an incisive and compelling lyricist who confidently takes *Michael* into unexpected places. On "Slummer," he describes how a teenage romance led to an unforeseen pregnancy. "They call it adolescence 'cause we learnin' adult lessons," he observes. The fact that Mike now portrays abortion as a simple matter of life and health will be a shock to those who remember him accusing Planned Parenthood of "planning miscarriages" on Run the Jewels' "A Christmas Fucking Miracle."

"It is evident I do better when I feel like the world against me and think I should never win," he raps on "Two Days." Yet it's clear that *Michael* is written from a musician, activist and, uh, landlord at the height of fame and personal growth. Some will understandably feel that his journey to the mountaintop was more interesting than the winner's circle he sits comfortably in now. It's all grist for a man who stays "high and holy," haters be damned. ®

BREAKING

Megan Moroney's Sweet Sad Country

SAVANNAH, GEORGIA, NATIVE Megan Moroney broke out earlier this year with the must-hear country hit "Tennessee Orange," a wonderful, expectations-subverting ballad about the pull of family, the thrill of star-crossed love, and the religion of college football. Now, she's followed that success up with *Lucky,* one of the best country debuts of the past few years; on "Sleep on My Side," she dumps a guy because he doesn't listen to John Prine, among other deal-breaking flaws, and "Traitor Joe" delivers bad news to a male friend who's getting cheated on. "I write sad songs for sad people," she sings. Every one of 'em rings true. JON DOLAN

FROM TOP: JONATHAN MANNION; DAVID MCCLISTER

Samuel L. Jackson

The 'Secret Invasion' star on AI, awards, and the Republican Party

The big news in Hollywood is the writers strike. How do you feel about it?
Writers deserve to be paid — and deserve to be paid fairly. Let's see if they can get some equity.

The SAG strike is looming as well. Tom Hanks recently discussed his fears about AI, and how the studios may produce work featuring someone after they've passed.
People just started worrying about that? I asked about that a long time ago. Ever since I did *Captain Marvel* and they de-aged me, it's like, "Well, I guess they can do this anytime they want to do it if they really want to!"

When I get a contract and it has the words "in perpetuity" and "known and unknown" on it, I cross that shit out. It's my way of saying, "No, I do not approve of this."

Jackson stars in 'Secret Invasion,' streaming now on Disney+.

What music moves you the most?
I like rock music — I was sort of a hippie during the '60s — and in the '70s, when I was in Atlanta, there was this Black rock band called Mother's Finest. I listen to a lot of modern hip-hop also. Sometimes I'll turn on some spatial DJ on Apple Music to hear whatever's out there now. I'm pretty open to everything except country [*laughs*].

Let's talk *Secret Invasion*. Had you been pushing Marvel to give Nick Fury his own project for a while?
I actually have not. My biggest concern with Marvel was trying to keep them from killing me more than anything else [*laughs*]. I always wanted to tell the story about who Nick was before he had these superhero friends — when he lived in the shadow world as a spy, and how he connected with these people. *Secret Invasion* is not a superhero movie — it's gritty and dark.

When you first popped up as Nick Fury in *Iron Man,* did you think you'd play him for 15-plus years?
They told me they were giving me a nine-picture deal, and at the time, making nine pictures would've taken almost 10, 12 years. I had no idea that it would happen that quickly.

Was that a good nine-picture deal for you, or a bad Scottie Pippen-type deal?
Every deal was negotiable [*laughs*]. But there are things I wish I'd been in that I wasn't in, like *Civil War*. If the kids are fighting, why isn't Nick Fury there to send them to their rooms? They never explained that to me.

You'll be in *The Marvels* with Brie Larson, and you two are pals. She got so much hate for playing Captain Marvel from the more sexist side of Marvel's fan base. What was it like to see her go through that?
Brie's a stronger person than people give her credit for.... These incel dudes who hate strong women, or the fact that she's a feminist who has an opinion and expressed it? Everybody wants people to be who they want them to be. She is who she is.

You were an usher at the funeral of Martin Luther King Jr. What was that like, and how far do you feel we've come since then?
The funeral was at Morehouse College. I was a student, and they asked students to help. I volunteered.

The world seems to be in as hard a place as it's always been.... When I grew up in segregation, I knew which white people didn't want to be bothered with me and I knew how they felt about me. I know how the Republicans feel about me now because of what my mindset is. When I see Trump, I see the rednecks I saw when I was growing up who tried to keep me in my place. That's what the Republican Party is to me. They're doing it to young people, gay people. If you're not them, you're the enemy.

When I was a kid, I really wanted you to win the Oscar for *Pulp Fiction*.
I might be the only person in the history of those boxes they have up when they're calling the winner who actually said, "Shit." When they said "Martin Landau," I was like, "Aw, shit." Now, there was no reason for me to expect to win because every award show up to that point I had lost to Martin Landau. But who the fuck saw *Ed Wood*? That's neither here nor there at this point. The moment they're about to call your name, you think, "Maybe they're gonna get it right this time."

MARLOW STERN

ILLUSTRATION BY **Mark Summers**

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